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ABSTRACT

Because written communication has nearly always been the medium for transmitting information in the business world, these essays are a step toward providing a seminal statement on the history and practice of business writing. The essays in this volume are: "Business Writing and the Spread of Literacy in Late Medieval England" (Malcolm Richardson); "Humanistic Influences on the Art of the Familiar Epistle in the Renaissance" (Donald R. Dickson); "The First Century of English Business Writing, 1417-1525" (Malcolm Richardson); "Methodology for Researching Early Business Writing in English" (Malcolm Richardson); "A 16th Century Work on Communication: Precursor of Modern Business Communication" (Herbert W. Hildebrandt); "The Earliest Correspondence of the British East India Company (1600-19)" Kitty O. Locker); "The Etiquette of American Business Correspondence" (L.W. Denton); "The Communication Theory of Johann Carl May: Its Influence on Business Communication in Germany" (Herbert W. Hildebrandt and Iris Varner); "Business Writing in America in the Nineteenth Century" (George H. Douglas); "'Elegant Simplicity': Lord Chesterfield's Ideal for Business Writing" (William E. Rivers); "From Press Book and Pigeonhole to Vertical Filing: Revolution in Storage and Access Systems for Correspondence (JoAnne Yates); "The Historical and Cultural Significance of Direct-Mail Fund-Raising Letters" (John Pauly); "'Sir, This Will Never Do': Model Dunning Letters, 1592-1873" (Kitty O. Locker); and "The Teaching of Business Writing at the Collegiate Level 1900-1920" (Francis W. Weeks). (SRT)

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Introduction

The following essays have as their core the central theme that written communication was the medium for transmitting information in the business world. These essays, therefore, are a step toward providing a seminal statement on the history and practice of business writing. Indeed, the editors hope that the ideas expressed in the essays will stimulate further investigations.

Those familiar with the tradition of rhetoric will discover that the first third of the essays focus on what students of rhetoric have known for years: oral persuasion, along with its many rules and suggestions, formed the basis for the study of writing. Hence familiar ancient names such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian as early progenitors of the oral tradition, will be found directly linked, in later years, to the written tradition. The conclusion is inescapable: the field of business writing has historical roots; the subject is not new. While the term "business writing" is a modern term, what is taught today under that rubric is rooted in ideas as old as Western Civilization.

It would seem, for example, that the ancient Greeks were even more conscious than we are today of the importance of persuasion, of getting people to willingly accept an idea. In some classrooms of the twentieth century it is possible (not only possible but even commonplace) to teach writing in a vacuum as in constructing sentences, paragraphs, memorandum, reports, or other assignments. With but a slight nod to the *specific* audience. The Greeks would have found such an approach unthinkable. They considered a specific audience at a specific time, even a specific place, when oral persuasion would occur. In his own history of rhetoric, Aristotle believed that rhetoric arose as a field of study in response to the social and political needs of fifth-century audiences, of democracies in Syracuse and Athens, where citizens needed to learn various forensic arts, especially of speaking, to be convincing in their regular interactions with their fellow citizens. Social life was fluid (as it is in our American society) and people adapted to it by use of their organized and structured verbal skills.

Thus the four introductory essays build on oral traditions, suggesting that tradition influenced the written word, particularly in the courts, in government, in the church, and in the merchant class.

The final two-thirds of the work focus on narrower areas. It will be obvious to the reader that one of the reasons a definitive history of business writing has not yet appeared is that the field itself is diffuse and interdisciplinary; practitioners of the art draw their expertise from a number of solid and well-founded disciplines. For example, the term "business writing" itself involves two areas: business and writing. And only recently are these areas slowly merging in schools of business administration.

Some of that academic diversity is exhibited in the specific analyses of major works and persons influencing business writing. All of these essays, for instance, have been written by persons who currently teach the art of business writing, but who are also interested in the roots of their discipline. Thus the essays move through areas as a seminal statement on business communication in the 16th century through the more modern direct mail fund-raising letter.

It is difficult to say much about the art of business writing during the Middle Ages because business as we know it today did not exist then. With the beginnings of trade between cities, often via maritime commerce, thought was given to the means and ways of forming commercial messages between two points. One of the essays in this collection deals with the correspondence of the British East India Company of the seventeenth century and illustrates that no far-flung company could succeed without a strong flow of correspondence between the far outposts and the company directors at home.

The result of increased correspondence was a desire to codify such practices, as exemplified in some of the formulary books which meticulously laid out the style and content which letters should follow in several different cultures.

These later essays, then, are directed toward didactic practices of a given era involving discussion of elaborate rhetorical theories and devices, while others have a wider historical context and deal with business writing as part of the ongoing experience of an age.

We have not, therefore, attempted a detailed linear history of business writing; rather we have gathered several themes that give a hint of the proud tradition on which business writing was based. To only think of business writing as a twentieth century American phenomenon is false; other cultures, and nations, have given considerable effort to a discipline long before we wrote our own texts and articles on the issue.

—The Editors

Business Writing and the Spread of Literacy in Late Medieval England

Malcolm Richardson
The University of Alabama in Huntsville

The recent interest in the history of business communication begins at an appropriate time—a time, we are told, when the old methods of transmitting business information are being relegated to the scrapheap of technological obsolescence.[1] Our trade journals and conference papers daily proclaim the birth of a new electronic age, when letters and interoffice memos will be instantly beamed from Waco to the Antipodes; when paper will vanish like papyrus before it and our reading matter will blink at us from television screens; when the "office of the future" will be in our own plugged-in homes where, sitting in front of the computer, we may communicate with the world twenty-four hours a day—and the world, God help us, can communicate back twenty-four hours a day.

An obvious point about these apparently inevitable changes is that the type of writing which our nascent gadgetry will deal with will largely be business and technical writing. Consequently, whatever effect electronic communication will have on the intellectual development of future generations is intimately tied to our perceptions of the purpose, value, and application of professional communications. This claim (which may initially sound exaggerated) is borne out by the role of business writing in one of the first major educational and psychological shifts in modern Western life, the shift from a primarily oral culture to a culture dependent on the written word and on wide functional literacy.[2]

This essay describes this shift and shows how written business communication played an integral role in England between about the year 1100 and the end of the fifteenth century. In doing so, I will draw on linguistic research I have been doing over the last five years, which itself has followed the work of two eminent medieval scholars, M. T. Clanchy of the University of Glasgow and John Hurt Fisher of the University of Tennessee.

Its applicability will be apparent to anyone interested in the history of business communication. In brief, this research indicates that in England, at

least, the creation of bureaucratic institutions dependent on business and legal writing slowly but inevitably changed English attitudes about writing in general. Furthermore, it directly led not only to a comparatively widespread literacy but also helped to standardize written English. This overview is necessarily simplified, but I believe that you will see that not only does it have interest in its own right, but also suggests real if still shadowy analogies with our current shift to electronic communications.

From Oral to Written Culture

The Germanic peoples who conquered England, and the Celtic peoples who remained in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, lived in a primarily oral culture. Not only was their literature oral (and therefore largely lost to us), but their laws and daily business transactions were likewise carried out orally. The Norman Conquest in 1066 at first had little influence over traditional methods. Despite the arrival of numbers of well-educated churchmen, and despite the example of that thorough inventory of "every ox and cow and pig" in all England, the Domesday Book, Englishmen showed little interest in preserving records of their transactions, at least records in the modern sense. Land, for example, was transferred not so much by written deed as by the symbolic passing of a knife or sword or even a handful of soil from the land being sold. Quite simply, the English saw no reason to trust the written word over a man's spoken oath. As late as the thirteenth century (an often repeated legend has it) the Earl Warenne, when challenged by the king to produce a charter giving his right to his lands, defiantly pulled out an ancient rusty sword used by his ancestor who came over with William the conqueror's freebooters and barked, "Look at this, my Lords, this is my warrant!" A later ancestor gave legal possession of a gift to Lewes Priory in 1147 by the symbolic token of hairs from his own head, snipped at the altar by the Bishop of Winchester himself.[3]

Nevertheless, in a century and a half, or roughly by the 1300, a thin but broad veneer of practical literacy had spread across England, encompassing not only the aristocracy but a surprising mixture of lower-level clergy, stewards, reeves, sheriffs, minor village officials, and even peasants. This upsurge not only in the number of functionally literate[4] men and women but, more importantly, in the trust given to the written word as a record of fact is almost exclusively the result of the growth of what today is called "business writing."

In his brilliant book, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307* (1979), M. T. Clanchy traces the growth of literate attitudes among the English upper classes, demonstrating conclusively that widespread functional literacy was the direct result of the growth of bureaucracy and the need to understand the increasing number of documents which that bureaucracy

produced. For a century after the Conquest the English had no bureaucracy at all, to speak of. In this pre-Lapsarian, Neo-Conservative paradise a few royal scribes followed the king around the country in his perpetual travels from one grim, damp castle to the next. Records were kept in trunks which followed after him along the muddy roads. Nobles like the Earl Warenne kept their rusty swords to serve as charters and let the written documents, if they existed at all, serve as fish-wrapping. However, by the year 1200 the picture changed considerably.

What happened was that the royal government stumbled upon the idea that record-keeping was important. I say "stumbled" because the government seemed to be acting out of some in-born impulse of bureaucracies toward record-keeping rather than out of any systematic plan. Even then, the "office mentality" developed slowly in the government. It failed to note down or retain copies of many if not most of the correspondence it sent out. When it did retain records, it usually put them on rolls of parchment sewed end-to-end, some of the rolls fifty feet long. It also failed to develop an indexing system, so that the whole purpose of record keeping was frustrated. In 1272, for example, Henry III insisted that some letters issued to Christ Church, Canterbury, were forgeries because they could not be found on his rolls. The letters were on his rolls, but his clerks, lacking any kind of index, had searched the rolls for the wrong year. Seven hundred years later and thousands of miles away, we can look up the same letters in about fifteen minutes by strolling to the university library and browsing through the index to the *Calendar of Patent Rolls*. Medieval chronicles recorded dozens of instances where kings optimistically ordered their clerks to search all of their records for specific information, only to have nothing conclusive come of it.[5]

Nevertheless, despite the failure of medieval information retrieval systems, business communication proliferated, and with it the ability to read, understand, and produce even more business communication. The pivotal years for this development were the chancellorship of Hubert Walter in the years immediately before and after 1200.[6] As chief justicar and chancellor for two improvident kings, Richard the Lion-Hearted and John Hubert, a churchman but raised virtually from the cradle as a bureaucrat, not only invented new series of records but, equally important, devised a more accurate filing and preservation system for the ones which already existed. It is from Hubert's terms in office that the public records of England spring. Even in the Middle Ages, the reign of Richard the Lion-Hearted (1189-1199) was considered the beginning of "legal memory," meaning that anyone who wished to have legal proof of a business transaction which took place after that date had to rely on a written record rather than oral testimony.

This proliferation of documents between about 1200 and 1300 had at least three major effects. The first was the creation or expansion of the profession

of scribes and scriveners, the first professional business writing consultants.[7] These men were almost always trained either by the church or, as the royal bureaucracy grew, in the legal quarter of London. On the lowest level were the copyists who merely transcribed documents from one page to another. On the highest level were scribes who also practiced as attorneys on a fairly low level, and who were paid to write and authenticate official letters, petitions, wills, and transfers of property. In between were thousands of minor officials, stewards, bailiffs, reeves, and private secretaries whose jobs demanded that they be able to write scores of official documents as well as know the proper rhetorical formats for different types of private letters. Many of these scribes were either independent consultants or were retained by wealthy patrons as permanent employees. Some scribes were even employed as teachers to apprentices in London and sometimes at the universities. One interesting development in the fourteenth century was the creation of a business writing school independent of but adjacent to Oxford University.[8] One head of this school, Thomas Sampson, seems to have been condemned by parents and school officials for seducing students away from their Liberal Arts courses into his business writing program—a partially amusing reversal of the typical situation today. In any case, Sampson's course seems to have been well attended both by ambitious students and by professional men from many walks of life. Incidentally, these professional scribes also helped create the first business writing textbooks, or *formularies*. These were largely collections of sample letters and documents for every conceivable occasion, which could then be copied or imitated by those not fully initiated into the art of writing.

A second effect of Hubert's new system was the build-up of the government's records in London and a corresponding build-up of records among anyone who had enough land, property, or legal rights to need protection. The reason was simple: if the government has the only record of your rights, then you are of necessity dependent on the government's efficiency and good will whenever you have to prove your right. On the other hand, if you have copies of the essential documents on hand or at least have them enrolled where your attorney can find them, then you no longer have to depend on a government which, after all, might have its own interests in your case. An instance from about Hubert Walter's time illustrates the growth of bureaucratic record-keeping since the days of record-keeping-by-rusty-sword: A certain Master David of London was awarded a royal annuity of £20, roughly $10,000 today, and wanted to make certain that the government didn't accidentally "forget," as it frequently did. As Clanchy summarizes:

> . . . the documents which David needed to safeguard his pension comprised two charters from Henry II, two charters from the young King [Henry II's eldest son], and a letter close to the young King; writs to Ranulf de Broc, the Bishop of London,

the sheriffs of Middlesex, and the barons of the Exchequer; official transcripts of these two letters; two letters from ministers to officials in England. Altogether eleven royal documents were to be produced and two letters from ministers. These letters in their turn would have created other correspondence. David had also, of course, to get the letter written to his agent and to keep a copy of it, which was preserved in his register and hence retained for posterity.[9]

The third effect that the proliferation of documents begun by Hubert Walter had was the spread of practical literacy among a surprisingly broad group of Englishmen. Clanchy illustrates how even peasants often had a nodding acquaintance with literacy, at least to the extent that they could understand a little Latin and could demand and preserve charters to their land and even keep their own seals for authenticating documents (p. 186-91). More common, of course, was the literacy or literate mentality among the lesser clergy and the nobility. As soon as the royal government had set the pace by developing archives, the land-holding segment of the population had little choice but to follow as quickly as possible. The country gentry, for example, learned very quickly that it was advantageous to retain a scribe to jot down letters and draw up legal documents and in some cases a secretary to preserve and file letters and documents received. It is no accident that the great collections of private letters which have given linguists and historians such incomparable glimpses into medieval language and life begin with a handful of Latin business letters from the fourteenth century or earlier. The Paston, Plumpton, and Stoner letters, through which we see so much of the human side of history of the later Middle Ages in England, all began as tiny bundles of letters, draughts, and memoranda stuffed away in the wooden chests of the lord of the manor.[10] Also clear is that during the fourteenth century many of the gentry learned to write as well as read. Since we moderns associate writing and reading as two sides of the same coin, we may not appreciate the leap of faith it took for the average country gentleman to learn to write something besides his own name. Not only was writing, with its elaborate paraphernalia and expensive parchment, a separate technology from reading, but most people even in 1400 considered that the purpose of any given piece of writing was to be read aloud, not silently, as today.[11] So in summary we can say that by about 1400, the growth of business communication, spreading out from the royal court in London, had created the necessity for a broad but shallow literacy among the nobility, gentry, middle-level clergy, and professional classes in general.

From French/Latin Literacy to English Literacy

This literacy was emphatically shallow, however. Regardless of the need of literacy, one could hardly expect much depth of literacy when the official

languages of the law and the church were Latin and French. By 1400, even the nobility probably spoke English as a first language, and of course the professional classes had always acquired French and Latin only insofar as was necessary for their advancement in business and society. Genuine literacy in something approaching the modern sense of the word had to wait until English was accepted as a socially and legally sanctioned language of business, and in this momentous linguistic change we again find business communication playing a major role.

As before, the central government in London provided the immediate impetus for the switch to English. In 1415, Henry V had re-animated the Hundred Years War by invading France. As a propaganda measure for his expensive war, he began sending his official and unofficial correspondence back home in English, thereby becoming the first British monarch to use written English regularly since Anglo-Saxon times. After Henry's untimely death in 1422, the royal government continued to encourage English by issuing select documents in English, by allowing more English-language documents to become a part of the official records, and by providing an official written dialect for scribes and lawyers to follow.

A series of studies by John Hurt Fisher, beginning in 1977, have demonstrated that the practical effects of this official encouragement of English were immediate.[12] The first effect was that after three centuries the English could safely conduct their own business affairs in writing in their own language. The Brewers Guild in London noted in their record book as early as 1422:

> Whereas our mother tongue, to wit, the English tongue, hath in modern days begun to be honorably enlarged and adorned; for that our most excellent lord King Henry the Fifth hath, in his letters missive, and divers affairs touching his own person, more willingly chosen to declare the secrets of his will [in it]; and for the better understanding of his people, hath, with a diligent mind, procured the common idiom (setting others aside) to be commended by the exercise of writing; and there are many of our craft of brewers who have the knowledge of writing and reading of the said English idiom, but in others, to wit, the Latin and French, before these times used, they do not in any wise understand; for which causes, with many others, it being considered how that the great part of the [L]ords and trusty [C]ommons have begun to make their matters to be noted down in our mother tongue, so we also in our craft, following in some manner their steps, have decreed in the future to commit to memory the needful things which concern us.[13]

The most important effect, however, was that the spread of business writing made writing itself a daily part of English life. Before the 1420's we have a few pieces of writing from the gentry but almost none from the professional and merchant classes. After 1420, however, the situation changes radically and rapidly. Those great collections of family correspondence published over the last century or so—the Plumpton, Trevelyan, Stoner, and most notably

the Paston correspondence—become voluminous as soon as the language in the collection shifts to English, in all cases beginning during the 1420's when the government was also accepting the shift. More important for present purposes, these letters are almost always business letters. Although historians have mined the letters for details of political and social life of the time, none have observed that their basic purpose is almost always related to business. Most letters are directly concerned with the family business, particularly with farming and the buying and selling of land. Many of them are inquiries to and from attorneys and agents in London and involve intricate and minute descriptions of business transactions. Of greatest interest to the history of business communication, however, are the Cely letters,[14] a collection of purely business correspondence from a family of London wool merchants and their agents, written in the 1470's and 1480's. The Cely letters are the largest discrete collection of English-language business correspondence before the Renaissance. While the spelling and grammar of the Cely family is wildly unpredictable even by the fifteenth-century standards, it is also clear that a century before, when Latin letters were the standard, the Celys would have carried on their communication by word of mouth rather than tackle a language so obviously alien to them. Lastly, we should note that while these great collections of business letters fill up thousands of pages of printed text, a vastly greater amount lies unpublished in the Public Record Office, the British Museum, and other archives. The point of this litany of letters is simply that business writing is at the heart of the modern conjunction of reading and writing. That is, between about 1200 and 1300 reading became a comparatively common skill because of the growing need to understand business and legal writing; after about 1420, with the development of English as an official written language of business and law, writing also became a skill which was an increasing necessity to the English middle class to carry out its normal business transactions.

Finally, business communication played one further role in the development of English literacy. As I have tried to show elsewhere,[15] the proliferation of business correspondence contributed mightily to the standardization of English spelling and to the development of modern Standard English. As Fisher has demonstrated, the closest ancestor of modern Standard Written English was not the London dialect used by Chaucer, but the dialect developed in the royal Chancery during the 1420's, when English became an official language of the law and the Chancery needed a standard form of it in which to write. All official letters and many other documents were cast in the form of a letter from the king or his council to the recipient. These letters were in the medieval rhetorical format called the *dictamen*, or the art of letter writing. When the Celys, Pastons, Stoners, and the thousands of other fifteenth-century letter-writers discovered their

need for writing business letters, they cast about for a suitable model. The most prestigious models were the official royal letters written in the official English dialect, called "Chancery English" by modern linguists. Consequently, when the letter-writers imitated the royal *dictamen* form, they also tended to imitate the linguistic forms used by the royal administration. In this way, the Chancery dialect became recognized as the official standard dialect, and, by its use in private business correspondence, gradually became standard far from its origin in London.

In conclusion, the effects on literacy and even human psychology caused in large part by the spread of business writing were profound but wholly unintentional. Certainly the harassed and bored medieval scribes had no idea as they daily ground out their repetitive and formulaic business letters that they were playing an important role in changing the way people look at the world around them. The same may be said about those modern scribes, computer programmers, whose almost salacious enthusiasm for their work puzzles the rest of us. But as Walter Ong, Eric Havelock,and others have pointed out over the past two decades, literacy and the literate mentality are functions of technology and practical necessity, not of literature and the need for self-expression. In such changes, business writing has played—and apparently will continue to play—a central role.

Notes and References

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1982 session of The Modern Language Association on "The Development of Prose Style in British Business Correspondence, 1200-1800."

2. Summarized recently in Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: *The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982).

3. Here, and in the next few pages, I draw heavily on M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 21-28 and elsewhere. See also C. M. Cipolla, *Literacy and Development in the West* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969). For an introduction to the history of official letters and other documents, see Pierre Chaplais, *English Historical Documents, King John-Henry VI, 119-1461* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), introduction; L. B. Dibben, "Secretaries in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (1913; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.); V. H. Galbraith, *An Introduction to the Use of Public Records* (Oxford: University Press, 1934).

4. "Functional literacy" in 1300 was, of course, very different than in the present. I use the term to mean merely "sufficient reading skill to function successfully under normal medieval circumstances."

5. Clanchy, pp. 138-47.

6. Described by Clanchy, pp. 29-59.

7. Christopher N. L. Brooke, "The Teaching of Diplomatic," *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 4(1970), 1-9; Paul Christianson, "Books and Their Makers in Medieval London," *Wooster*, 96, No. 3, 10-25.

8. H. G. Richardson, "Business Training in Medieval Oxford," *American Historical Review*, 46(1940-41), 259-80; "Letters of the Oxford Dictatores," in *Formularies Which Bear on the History of Oxford*, ed. H. E. Salter, *et. al.*, Oxford Historical Society, n.s., No. 5 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), 329-450.

9. Clanchy, p. 30.

10. *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, 1976); *Plumpton Correspondence*, ed. Thomas Stapleton, Camden Society, 1st ser., no. 4 (London, 1839); *The Stoner Letters and Papers*, ed. C. L. Kingsford, 2 vols., Camden Society, 3rd ser., nos. 29-30 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1919).

11. Clanchy, pp. 88-115, 231-259.

12. John H. Fisher, "Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century," *Speculum*, 52 (1977), 870-99; "Chancery Standard and Modern Written English," *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 6 (1979), 136-144; *Anthology of Chancery English* (with Malcolm Richardson and Jane Fisher,) University of Tennessee Press, 1984; see also Malcolm Richardson, "Henry V, the English Chancery, and Chancery English," *Speculum*, 55 (1980), 726-50.

13. Quoted in A. C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language*. 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), pp. 183-84.

14. *The Cely Letters, 1472-1488*, ed. Alison Hanham, Early English Text Society, No. 273 (Oxford: University Press, 1975).

15. Malcolm Richardson, "The *Dictamen* and Its Influence On Fifteenth-Century English Prose," *Rhetorica*, 2 (1984), 207-26.

Humanistic Influences on the Art of the Familiar Epistle in the Renaissance

Donald R. Dickson
Texas A&M University

In an age in which media of communication were quite limited—even newspapers were virtually unknown—the letter was an especially important vehicle for conveying political, commercial, personal, and newsworthy information. The sheer number of letters preserved from the Renaissance makes studying the history of letter writing an enormous task. In this article I would like to focus on the history of one usually overlooked kind of letter—the Renaissance business letter as it was set forth in the letter-writing manuals. Letters for commercial purposes were classified as a form of the *familiar* letter, which was one of the four kinds of letters (along with the encomiastic or demonstrative, the persuasive or deliberative, and the judicial) patterned after the kinds of rhetoric.

Furthermore, epistolography was now becoming an integral part of the study of rhetoric in the grammar schools. Thus to chart the development of the structure and style of the familiar letter, we must also understand something of how rhetoric was taught and practiced at this time. We shall discover that business communication was in the mainstream of Renaissance prose, and like it drew upon the rhetorical theories of the humanists. Specifically, we shall see that the rebirth of classicism meant reconceiving the letter as a work that was structured like a classical oration, with its style dependent on traditional figures and tropes. Despite this initial impetus toward Ciceronian Latinity, however, the second generation of these manuals reflected the movement toward Senecan curtness both in style and structure. The history of the familiar letter, therefore, simply mirrors the larger struggle of the vernacular to find a natural balance under the pressure of classically imposed standards.

Epistolography as a Rhetorical Art

Those few scholars who have studied the art of letter writing have argued that Renaissance treatises derived immediately from medieval formularies

based on the *ars dictaminis*.[1] The actual line of descent is more complicated than this, however. It is more correct to say that the *dictamen* and the Renaissance letter-writers have as their common heritage the accepted principles of oratory as established by Cicero and Quintilian. Authorities such as Erasmus, Vives, Macropedius, and Hegendorff turned away from the medieval *dictamen*, which had become fettered with legalisms and rigid formulae, and returned to classical models that were better suited to expressing complexity of thought in a more elegant style.[2] Such a movement is, of course, consistent with the general rebirth of classicism that still serves to define the Renaissance as a cultural and intellectual phenomenon.

Though the *dictamen* was adapted originally from the classical oration, which was obviously capable of great subtlety and grace, in practice it had become quite rigid. The formula for the model letter devised by Alberic of Monte Cassino in the ninth century was widely accepted as the norm. The beginning of each fixed section was usually signaled by a formulaic phrase, and a typical letter could usually be constructed by simply filling in the blanks with the appropriate business.[3] For example, after the proper *address*, "Right reverend and worshipful father," followed the *salutation*, "I recommend me unto you." The background section began with a *notification*, "Please it you to understand . . ." which was followed by the *disposition* or *injunction*, "beseeching you to consider these causes and so to remember me that I may have such things as I may do my master service with and pleasure. . . ." Lastly came the *valediction* and the *attestation and date*. "No more to you at this time, but God have you in his keeping. Written at Stamford the 13 day of March [1462]."[4] It is easy to see why the early humanists turned from such formulaic letter models to more graceful and subtle ones.

Where the medieval formularies prescribed both a rigid form and language for the letter, the humanists conceived of the epistle as an oration that only differed in the external mechanics of its salutation, valediction, and subscription (the date and place where it was written). Throughout the Renaissance the letter writing manuals frequently bore all the trappings of the rhetorical handbook: some used marginal glosses to indicate tropes and figures being used in a model letter; others included long sections on rhetoric or referred their readers to such popular works as Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique*. By far the most influential of the treatises on letter writing was Erasmus' *Libellus de conscribendis epistolis* (1522), a work taught in Tudor grammar schools and later abridged by other authors to serve as the basis of their own letter-writing manuals. Erasmus restored the art of epistolography to its place in the art of rhetoric by classifying letters according to the three kinds of rhetoric found in Aristotle—political, judicial,and encomiastic. To this group he added a fourth classification, the familiar letter, by which addition almost any kind of missive could be included, such as those dealing

with news, gossip, mirth, requests, congratulations, and so forth.[5] Much of the *De conscribendis* is devoted to examples of the four kinds of letters, which are further arranged in subclassifications as the medieval formularies were (judicial letters for instance can be accusatory or defensive, etc.). Erasmus also reestablished the form of the classical oration (*exordium, narratio* or *propositio, confirmatio, conjuratio,* and *peroratio*) as the pattern for the epistle, and he offered conventional advice about suiting the style of the letter to its audience and purpose. Letters, like orations, could be written in the high, middle, or low style depending on circumstances. About the familiar, or the "extraordinary," letter's style, he said that he could prescribe no certain method since its kinds were so various; but when simply announcing or informing, one ought to be simple and lucid, above all brief and distinct.[6] His implicit good sense on the matter of style also paved the way for greater informality in the structure of the familiar letter, as we shall see.

Almost as significant as redefining epistolography as a rhetorical art was the use that epistles were put to in the English grammar schools established by the humanists to develop the classical liberal education (under the auspices of Erasmus' *De ratione studii*). The lower grammar school (the first three years) was devoted to learning Latin, using *Lilies Grammar* along with simple Latin texts, such as colloquies. The upper grammar school began in the fourth form with the study of rhetoric, the second part of the *trivium*. At St. Paul's, a school Erasmus helped found, the study of rhetoric began with his *De conscribendis*; many other grammar schools modeled their curricula after St. Paul's. As potent a force as Erasmus was in Tudor education, it is not surprising that a good deal of the *De conscribendis* is written for a schoolmaster's use, as T. W. Baldwin has pointed out.[7]

Erasmus' readers are told precisely how to develop rhetorical skills by using the relatively simple form of the letter as an instrument for learning. One long chapter, titled "Exercitatio et Imitatio," is devoted to how the student can develop the rhetorical arts learned in the lower form through short, epistolary arguments; another titled "Quomodo Proponenda Materia," is given to ways the master can foster the invention of his students by devising *sententiae*, arguments, amplifications and the like from stories well known to them. Furthermore, students were drilled in the art of letter writing through various "double translation" exercises that encouraged Ciceronian Latinity and emphasized classical structure. The schoolmaster himself, Roger Ascham, preferred that his students first study and translate orally, with his help, a Ciceronian letter. Then the students translated it into English; finally, an hour or so later, they retranslated it into, it was hoped, good Ciceronian Latin. John Brinsely favored a more imaginative method. His students studied Cicero's *Epistles* diligently, learning his phrases, topics and methods. The students then wrote a letter in English on the same subject as Cicero,

though they had to direct it to a friend of theirs, thus necessitating changes in the person, place, and tenses. This English letter was finally translated into Latin and compared with Cicero's original.[8] Such epistolary exercises were used to teach Latin composition, and they placed an obvious emphasis on letter writing as a graceful art that every educated person had to develop. The classical model continued its influence throughout the Renaissance, for as late as 1660 Hoole's grammar advocated essentially the same methods.[9]

Model Letters in the Complete Letter-Writers

Letters in the Renaissance, including the familiar letter, were patterned loosely after those of Cicero, whose epistles were studied as assiduously as his orations. The *dispositio*, or arrangement, of the classical oration was used as the model. There were five basic parts, though the skillful writer would, according to Erasmus, strive to conceal any formal plan. The first part is the *exordium*, in Angel Day's words, "a beginning or induction to the matter to be written of, which is not alwayes after one sort or fashion, but in divers maners."[10] The second part is the *narratio* or *propositio*: "eache servinge to one effect, wherein is declared or proponed, in the one by playne termes, in the other by inference, or comparisons, the very substaunce of the matter whatsoever to be handled." In practice this second part was difficult to distinguish from the *exordium*, both serving as the general introduction to the whole; Day's *English Secretorie* labelled the rhetorical parts of its model letters, and many of them have no *exordium* per se. What might be called the body of the letter began with the *confirmatio*, "wherein are amplyfied or suggested manye reasons for the agravating or proofe of anye matter in question." The *confutatio* served to rebut any objections to the argument and was followed by the conclusion, or the *peroratio*, "in which after a briefe recapitulation of that which hath beene urged, the occasions mooving affection are immediately concluded." Most authorities recognized that not every letter would have all of these rhetorical parts. As Day said, "These are not altogether at all tymes used, but some or the most of them as occasion serveth."[11] Nonetheless, since a letter was considered an oration written out, ideally it would resemble this form and we find most of Day's exemplary letters fully labelled in his guide for scribes and secretaries.

Some familiar letters are patterned closely after this oratorical model. For example, the young princess Elizabeth Tudor—who had been instructed by Roger Ascham, whose commitment to epistolography as part of one's rhetorical training we have noted—observed this pattern rather exactly in a familiar letter to Catherine Parr, then Henry VIII's sixth wife and Queen of England. The letter is what we would call a letter of transmittal or a cover letter, intended to present to the Queen a translation of a work Elizabeth

herself had made. After a rather effusive salutation, she began with a nicely balanced Ciceronian period:

> Not only knowing the affectuous will and fervent zeal, the which your Highness hath towards all godly learning, as also my duty towards you (most Gracious and Sovereign Princess), but knowing also, that pusillanimity and idleness are most repugnant unto a reasonable creature, and that (as the philosopher saveth) even as an instrument of iron or of other metal waxeth soon rusty, unless it be continually occupied; even so shall the wit of a man or a woman wax dull and unapt to do or understand any thing perfectly, unless it be always occupied upon some manner of study. Which things considered, hath moved so small a portion as God hath lent me, to prove what I could do. And, therefore, have I (as for essay or beginning, following the right notable saying of the proverb aforesaid) translated this little book out of French rhyme into English prose, joining the sentences together as well as the capacity of my simple wit and small learning could extend themselves. The which book is entitled or named, *The Mirror, Or Glass, of the Sinful Soul*, wherein is contained . . .[12]

The adage in her *exordium* served cleverly both to justify Elizabeth's own efforts in translating the work as well as to persuade Catherine Parr to use her time wisely in reading Elizabeth's translation (even at the age of eleven she was capable of some subtlety!). The conjunctive "therefore" signaled the transition to *narratio*, where Elizabeth announced more directly her purpose in writing. What follows the clause "wherein is contained" is quite obviously the beginning of the *confirmatio*, the description of the work, and so forth.

Most familiar letters were far more informal in structure and in style than Elizabeth's. Her tutor Roger Ascham, for instance, wrote loosely structured and colloquially styled letters. From 1550 to 1553 he lived abroad as secretary to an English ambassador, and his many letters to friends and colleagues are best described as chatty. Typically the openings of his letters are quite brief, usually only a sentence or so to greet his reader politely and to set up his real interest—the news of the day. His letters are actually miscellanies, telling the fascinating story of his travels in mid-sixteenth-century Europe. The reader learns about the latest acquisitions to his numismatic collection or about the famous people Ascham met, and we hear the perennial lament of the unrequited letter writer who gave far more often than he got in return.[13] Ascham was here following a tradition also established by Cicero, whose familiar letters to Atticus and others concentrated on history in the making; structurally, these letters pass from one topic to another as Cicero relived the events for his readers. Furthermore, Cicero's epistolary style was the *sermo cotidianus*, the speech used in familiar discourse (and not the formal diction used in literary compositions). Thus Erasmus, Ascham and the many others who followed insisted that the style of the letter—and especially that of the familiar letter—be simple and direct, as though one person were talking to another. In the words of William Fullwood, the author of the first letter

writing guide in English: "the best language that may bee is the common and familiar speech, and not of rare and diffused phrases, or Inkehorne termes scummed from the Latine."[14]

With the growing mercantile class in England arose the need for complete letter-writers for those who were without the benefit of formal training in rhetoric that grammar schools and the universities provided. William Fullwood, a member of the Merchant Taylor's Company, answered that need rather well with his *Enemy of Idlenesse*, published first in 1568. Fullwood shrewdly recognized the needs and abilities of his intended audience and selected his exemplary letters accordingly. In the dedicatory verses he wrote:

> For know ye sure, I meane not I,
> the cunning clarke to teach:
> But rather to the unlearned sort,
> a fewe precepts to preach.

The few precepts were taken mostly from Erasmus' *De conscribendis*. Though his model letters came mostly from the continental humanists,[15] he seems to have chosen them for their practical appeal. For instance we find letters entitled "How to request the counsel of an advocate" or "How to give thanks for a corporall gift received." His choice of letters to handle current dilemmas may strike some modern readers as unusual—e.g., under the heading "How to write Letters giving generall commission and charge of his businesse or affaires" he offered a model letter "wherein Cicero committeth to Scipio his authoritie over all his businesse in Rome"[16]—but we must remember that even merchants wanted to emulate the best models from the golden age of Rome. By updating his advice on the correct forms of the salutation, the subscription (the signature and closing which is placed on the page according to the social rank of the reader and writer), and superscription (the outside address), Fullwood no doubt believed he was providing all the "modern" information his readers needed.

Fullwood's explanation of the structure of a letter shows that he too conceived of letter writing as a part of rhetoric and oratory.

> It is to be noted, that every Epistle containeth three parts, even as an argument doth, which consisteth of the *Major*, the *Minor*, and *Conclusion*, which the Orators call the *Cause*, the *Intent*, and the *Consequence*. The *Cause* is in place of the *Major* which moveth or constraineth us to write to another, willing to signifie unto them our minde. The *Intent* is in stead of the *Minor*, whereby wee give them to understand what our minde is by Epistle or Letter. The *Consequent* or *Conclusion* is of it selfe sufficiently knowne.[17]

No one else to my knowledge used this same terminology, which in any case seems not to differ significantly from the mainstream (for especially in a familiar letter, "cause" serves to introduce a subject and "intent" clarifies what the writer wants done or known by the reader). Though he classified letters

according to the major Ciceronian kinds, in effect he emphasized the many subclassifications (each of which was directed toward a practical situation) because he mixed the various kinds together. Doing so made *The Enemy of Idlenesse* more useful for the tradesmen and merchants, since they could scan the table of contents for the situation most nearly like their own. Each particular situation had a brief introduction, where general advice was offered, followed by an example and then a second letter that answered the first. Fullwood's emphasis on letters that handled very particular situations represents something of a falling off from epistolography as it was taught in the schools, but it is understandable, given the nature of his less well-educated audience who needed actual models to copy. He also included a dozen love letters to aid in arranging a match of fortunes. His manual seems to have been quite popular, judging from the fact that seven further editions were called for by 1621.

Fullwood showed that a ready market existed for such works, and a spate of books on letter writing in English followed by Abraham Fleming, William Fiston, John Browne, and others.[18] Most of these contained selections from Cicero, Isocrates, and Pliny, as well as the humanists such as Erasmus and Vives. When Angel Day published *The English Secretorie* in 1586, he used a somewhat different approach; he wrote all his own, often amusing, letters instead of borrowing them from the usual places. Aside from this Day carried on the Erasmian tradition: he divided the structure of the letter into the five parts of the oration and classified letters using the Ciceronian kinds. (A fuller treatment of Day's work is discussed in a later essay in this volume.) It is worth noting, however, that Day's section on the familiar letter has not a single marginal gloss. For in an introductory chapter he had explained that familiar letters should be "simple, plaine, and of the lowest and meanest stile, utterly devoyde of anie shadow of hie and loftye speeches"—which is to say, a style quite unlike that suited for the graver kinds of letters, which required "a more high and lofty deliveraunce, partaking many waves with that kind accustomed in Orations."[19] The relaxed structure and the simple, direct style of these letters, along with Day's often entertaining examples, prepared the way for a new direction in Renaissance letter writing guides.

The Popularization of the Classical Model

The history of the familiar letter after Angel Day, who represents the flowering of the humanist tradition in a popular, practical form, must be seen against the backdrop of literary taste in the later Renaissance. As we have noted, the models set forth before prose writers in the schools had been Cicero's or his humanist imitators. The balanced Ciceronian period, with its smoothly flowing rhythms and symmetrical structures, was widely emulated.

For a variety of reasons too involved to rehearse here (but carefully studied by others[20]), an anti-Ciceronian movement arose that offered Seneca's more concise style as an alternative to the more copious Ciceronian style. For our purposes in understanding the development of the familiar letter, Bacon's criticism of the fanatical imitators of Cicero reveals the key distinction between the two styles. In a well-known passage in *The Advancement of Learning*, while exposing the vanities of studies, Bacon described those who concerned themselves primarily with the arrangement of words instead of with the matter under consideration:

> For men began to hunt more after words than matter; and more after the choiceness of the phrase, and the round and clean composition of the sentence, and the sweet falling of the clauses, and the varying and illustration of their works with tropes and figures, than after the weight of matter, worth of subject, soundness of argument, life of invention, or depth of judgment. . . . Then did Car of Cambridge, and Ascham, with their lectures and writings, almost deify Cicero and Demosthenes, and allure all young men that were studious unto that delicate polished kind of learning. . . . In sum, the whole inclination and bent of those times was rather towards copie than weight.[21]

Erasmus himself had brilliantly parodied this same tendency in his *Ciceronianus* (1528), where he had argued that style should always be subordinate to the ends to be accomplished. But for too many in the early Renaissance, style had become an end in itself (seen most clearly in the highly stylized Euphuism), and so other models were revived. Though the development of prose style is complex, one line of descent is clear: by the end of the Seventeenth Century, those in the Royal Society were attempting to establish a scientifically precise language based overwhelmingly on *things* rather than *words*. Granted, when the costermonger wrote a letter to the draper, he did not align himself first in the controversy of Cicero versus Seneca. But the debate over prose style did affect those who wrote the manuals that costermongers and drapers read to learn how to fashion their letters decorously.

The influence of the "Senecan amble" on the letter-writing manuals is most evident in John Hoskins' *Direction for Speech and Style* (written in 1599?). Though Hoskins' treatise existed only in manuscript at the beginning of the Seventeenth Century, it had currency through two sources: Ben Jonson recorded Hoskins' chapter on letter writing as a commonplace that was published in *Timber* (1641) and Thomas Blount borrowed much of it for his *Academy of Eloquence* (1654).[22] Hoskins remains an important figure because this chapter on epistolography was the first work in English based on the *Epistolica institutio* (1590) of Justus Lipsius, perhaps the preeminent advocate of Senecanism of the time.[23]

Hoskins said nothing about the traditional structure of the letter: instead he offered sage advice on audience analysis, which seems to represent an approach to structure based on something other than formal oratory.

> For men's capacity and delight, you are to weigh what will be apprehended first with great delight and attention, what next regarded and longed for especially, and what last will leave most satisfaction and, as it were, the sweetest memorial and brief of all that is past, in his understanding whom you write to.[24]

The writer, in other words, should consider the reader's need for information, taking care to use the beginning and ending portions of the letter for special emphasis. Hoskins devoted most of his efforts to style. Since a letter ought to be the familiar speech of friends absent from one another, qualities of style most desirable were brevity, perspicuity (here he took a jab at the *ars notaria* by advising the writer to "let not your letter be penned like an English statute"), plainness,and lastly respect or tact. Brevity for Lipsius had been the most important of these for epistolary style, since for the Stoics the end of discourse always was to instruct. While this may seem natural to us as moderns, we should recall that we are a long way from the familiar letter of Queen Elizabeth quoted above. The concern for utility and the reader's needs and abilities is transforming the letter as penned oration into a more manageable instrument of communication.[25]

After the beginning of the seventeenth century, letter writing guides took a new direction. All the authors we have noted so far conceived of their works on epistolography as handbooks designed to teach the undereducated or as reference books for those who might have forgotten their early training. The letter writing guides written after 1600 were no longer part of this tradition. None had an introductory treatise on the aims and methods of epistolography; moreover, the model letters seemed chosen and arranged as much for entertainment as for instruction.[26] Probably because Day's successful *English Secretorie* had amused at times while teaching a generation of secretaries and scribes, others who followed exploited the entertainment aspect, most notably Nicholas Breton's *A Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters* (1602). The difference in intention between the "complete" letter-writers and Breton's collection of familiar letters was readily apparent in his Preface, where he told his readers how a "Poste" (a letter-carrier) had dropped "a Packet of idle Papers" which he was simply offering for their perusal.[27] No pretense, in other words, was made towards edification. Indeed the volume began with an assortment of love letters, and most of the others offered ways of handling social as well as business problems. Interestingly enough Breton was the first to offer model letters asking to borrow money and letters requesting payment. The provenance of *A Poste with a Packet* seems more the courtesy literature or the conduct books of the Renaissance—those works that established standards of acceptable social behavior. Many of Breton's other works were clearly of this kind. After Breton came a vogue for French-inspired collections of letters with such titles as *The Academy of Complements* (1640) and *The Secretary in Fashion* (1640), and

the letter-writers moved even further from the Erasmian tradition. As one scholar puts it, by the end of the century the English middle-class was glutted with "academies of complements, and pearls of eloquence without number."[28]

Even though Breton and the French complemental letter-writers had their day, Cicero and Seneca continued to be taught in the grammar schools throughout the century. And, in fact, many of Breton's business letters were as useful as Day's had been, for a Renaissance audience, as models of more or less plainly written and directly structured letters for handling common problems. The popularization of the art of letter writing was inevitable as the merchant class prospered, since we would naturally expect the manuals to reflect the needs and abilities of the good burghers who purchased them. But as the history of epistolography shows, the familiar letters written from Cheapside share the same origins as those written from the scholar's study.

Notes

1. Elbert N. S. Thompson, *Literary Bypaths of the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1924), p. 92; Katherine Gee Hornbeak, "The Complete Letter-Writer in English, 1568-1800," *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, 15, Nos. 3-4 (1934), 13; and Jean Robertson, *The Art of Letter Writing* (London: University Press of Liverpool, 1943), pp. 9-13.

2. Malcolm Richardson, "The Earliest Business Letters in English: An Overview," *The Journal of Business Communication*, 17 (Spring 1980), 19-31, makes this same point.

3. For more detail on the *dictamen*, see Richardson and Charles Sears Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic* (1928; rpt. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1959), pp. 206-27; and James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

4. These phrases are from a modernized edition of *The Paston Letters*, ed. Norman Davis (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 94-95.

5. Cicero had also included the familiar letter as one of the important types; see Cicero, *The Letters to His Friends*, trans. W. Glynn Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and London: Heineman, 1952), I, 101, 103.

6. "Nec huius generis, quoniam varium est, certa ratio praescribi potest. Tantum illud in genere dicam, quod nunciatio simplex, et lucida esse debet, brevis praeterea et distincta," Erasmus, *De conscribendis epistolis*, ed. Jean-Claude Margolin, in *Opera omnia*, vol. I, pt. 2 (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1971), p. 541. See also Judith Rice Henderson, "Erasmus on the Art of Letter Writing," in *Renaissance Eloquence*, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 331-55.

7. For a full account of the use of epistolography in developing rhetorical skills, see T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespere's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke*, 2 vols. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1944), II, 239-87.

8. Discussed in Baldwin, I, 264-67 and II, 258-61. Baldwin is quoting from Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1570) and Brinsely's *Ludus Literarius, or, The Grammar Schoole* (1612).

9. Charles Hoole, *A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching Schoole*, ed. R. C. Alston (Menston, England: Scolar Press, 1969), pp. 144-56.

10. Angel Day, *The English Secretorie*, ed. R. C. Alston (Menston, England: Scolar Press, 1967), pp. 22-23. Day was more indebted to Erasmus than any other English author of a letter writing manual.

11. Day, p. 22.

12. *The Letters of Queen Elizabeth I*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), pp. 5-6.

13. *The Whole Works of Roger Ascham*, ed. J. A. Giles, 3 vols. (London, 1864-65). The letters constitute over half of his works; a particularly good example of an Ascham letter is the one to the Fellows of his college at Cambridge (vol. I, pt. 2, pp. 307-15).

14. William Fullwood, *The Enemy of Idlenesse* (London, 1621), p. 10.

15. Robertson, pp. 13-17.

16. Fullwood, pp. 123-26.

17. Fullwood, p. 15.

18. See Robertson, pp. 67-80, for a full bibliography of the manuals.

19. Day, p. 18.

20. Morris W. Croll, *"Attic" and Baroque Prose Style*, ed. J. Max Patrick and Robert O. Evans (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) and George Williamson, *The Senecan Amble* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) remain the classic studies of Renaissance prose.

21. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning, Book I*, ed. William A. Armstrong (London: Athlone Press, 1975), pp. 70-71. For an excellent study of Bacon on this issue, see Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

22. John Hoskins, *Directions for Speech and Style*, ed. Hoyt H. Hudson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1935), p. v.

23. See Williamson, pp. 121-49, for an account of Lipsius.

24. Hoskins, p. 4. Lipsius had also urged that the structure of the letter be determined according to the subject itself and not always by formal oratorical expectations: "sic tibi in omni materie, quam pro re, pro judicio dispone." Justus Lipsius, *Epistolica instituto*, in *Opera omnia* (Vesaliae, 1675), II, 1073.

25. The influence of Seneca on epistolography is not limited to style. Seneca's letters are in actuality moral essays, and several writers in England imitated Seneca's "matter," most notably Joseph Hall with his *Epistles* (London, 1608, 1611). The familiar essay is only a step away from such literary efforts.

26. The only exception I am aware of is Thomas Gainsford, the *Secretaries Studie* (London, 1616). Though Gainsford included no general treatise on letter writing, his elaborate system of classification (letters "Oeconomicall, Politicall, Objurgatory, Excusatory," etc.) harkened back to the tradition of Erasmus and to the formularies. It is interesting to note, however, that even Gainsford's collection began with a series of "Amorous, or loving Letters."

27. *The Works in Verse and Prose of Nicholas Breton*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (London, 1879; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1966), vol. II, section h, p. 4.

28. Robertson, p. 65.

The First Century of English Business Writing, 1417-1525

Malcolm Richardson
The University of Alabama in Huntsville

Commenting on the changes in letter-writing style between the time of his youth and the 1830's, Colonel Newcome, a character in William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Newcomes*, writes:

> I can't but think that this, the *modern and natural style*, is a great progress upon the old-fashioned manner of my day, when we used to begin to our fathers "honoured Father," or even "honoured Sir" some precisians used to write from Mr. Lord's Academy at Tooting, where I went before Grey Friers'—though I suspect parents were no more *honoured* in those days than nowadays.[1]

Many business persons today who were educated in the 1930's and 1940's must feel the same way about the changes in business writing in the last quarter of the century: how much more natural and informal it seems now! Going back even farther in time, business letters from the 1920's often seem as antiquated as Col. Newcome's quoted above. No question about it, business writing has changed and is changing.[2]

And yet, how little we know of those changes. Business writing has a history extending back before the Bible, but for all practical purposes it is a history in which most of the pages are blank. While materials for the study of business writing history are plentiful, we are knowledgeable about only the last century or so. As business writing becomes a mature and respected discipline in our universities, we will no doubt fill in those blank pages and thereby place business communication in its proper place in the traditions of rhetoric. The present essays are an important step in that direction.

The following essay explores the earliest period of business writing in English, beginning in the early fifteenth century and extending into the first quarter of the sixteenth. The opening section differentiates between our modern assumptions about proper business style and rhetoric and those of medieval writers. The second section traces the development of English business communication from its origins in the government and legal sections of London to its use by secretaries and professional letter-writers throughout

England. The concluding section surveys the major collections of private business letters from this period printed since the nineteenth century.

The Audience and Style of Early Business Communication

To the modern reader, most fifteenth century business writing seems not only excessively formal and artificial, but singularly determined to take the most roundabout path to get to the point, which it sometimes never reaches. The fault, however, lies with us, not with those early writers: they approached business writing from the point of view of a very different culture, one that sought to make business writing conform to European-wide rhetorical traditions stretching back a thousand years. Before we examine their writing in detail, we first need to adjust our thinking to the realities of this remote age.

The Audience

The business community of the 1400's was relatively small, although well-organized and tightly controlled in the cities by the guild system. We read so frequently of the "rise of the middle class" that one wag accurately commented that the middle class seems to have been rising ever since the Flood receded. In fact, the business community of the fifteenth century was, by our standards, small and provincial.[3] London, by far the largest city in England, had a population of only about 60,000 in 1400. Most of the business transacted was person-to-person, and whatever letters and records were composed by merchants have mostly disappeared in the course of time, which deals harshly with such ephemera. Much of the business of the time was still tied up with agriculture. Chaucer's Reeve and Miller are probably more typical of the businessmen of 1400 than are his guildsmen, although city merchants were predictably more advanced in their use of business letters and records. A letter from the Cely collection, representative in itself of nongovernment business writing of the time, incidentally reveals what might well be called the "Chaucerian" level of middle class business relations:

> Worshipful brother, after all due recommendation, I recommend me to you, etc. Furthermore sir, it is so that we lack pelts here, and we have sent to St. Omer and there we have been promised two hundred more pelts for you; and I have sent to Bruges and Sandwich for more pelts, for we must have more for you. And sir, Robert Byngam sent to me for four nobles of quit-rent for the ground you bought from Andrew Hawes, and I told him I knew not thereof—if it were your duty to do so I would answer thereto: Wherefore, I pray you for an answer. Also sir, it is so that Botrell has been uncourteous in his deeds, for he hath thrown dung in at your woolhouse window among your sheepskins; and since that time he has given a man that spread dung around three or four blows and tooks his pitchfork from him. Even though I have spoken with him, he is uncourteous in his speech [etc.]. No more to you at this time, but Jesus keep you. At Calais the six day of January, anno [1482].[4]

Most of the business correspondence which has been preserved was deemed to be of legal or political importance. The guilds and city corporations maintained record books into which they entered not only their own personal accounts but also appropriate charters, royal letters, court rulings, and other documents which might be necessary in the future to defend their rights and privileges.[3] The great collections of family letters, discussed below, from which we learn so much about English life of the time, are preserved mainly because they were seized by royal officials as evidence in law suits and hence preserved in the national archives by sheer accident. Except for the Cely family letters and the guild records, most of the correspondence from this period comes from either the wealthy landed gentry or from government sources.

Another important difference we must call attention to is the lack of distinction in the fifteenth century between what we today would classify as "business" and "private" correspondence, the result of an interesting change in our social outlook over the past several hundred years. People of the twentieth century, raised virtually from the cradle on various diluted forms of modern psychology, tend to see an opposition between their inner, or "real," selves and their outer, "public," or "professional" selves. We consequently expend a great deal of energy trying either to reconcile the two or, more frequently, to keep the two carefully separated. Most modern businessmen, for example, rarely put the same degree of "personality" into their business letters that they would put into what is usually termed a "friendly" letter. Medieval people, on the other hand, saw no contradiction between their public and private selves. For them, their "real" self was largely determined by their social role, whether it be as farmer, priest, merchant, or king, and their behavior at all times was expected to be in accord with what was demanded of people in that role. Upon being introduced to new people, we today usually first find out what his or her occupation is, then, through conversation and observation, consciously work to discover their individual characteristics. Medieval people seem to have put much more emphasis on a person's occupation as a guide to personality and to have regarded occupation as a reliable index to character (as in Chaucer's writings). This stereotyping seems very repressive to us, but scarcely bothered anyone at all at the time. "You don't act like most lawyers I've known" would be considered a calculated insult in 1400.

What all this has to do with fifteenth (and sixteenth) century business writing is this: some of the strangeness we find in the business writing of that age is because we sense in it a certain stiffness and formality in style coupled with what seems like a surprising informality of form, grammar, and content. A letter writer may be giving some carefully detailed instructions to his lawyer in London and, out of nowhere it seems, may throw in some information

about his daughter's wedding, the weather in the north, or the king's latest illness. This lack of decorum offends our modern business writing sensibilities, but may, I believe, be largely explained by the attitude medieval people took toward the relationship between their work and their private lives. When people are always "in character," to borrow a phrase from the stage, then their writing is not always going to show the separation of business affairs from everything else that we have come to expect in most good business writing. By the standards of the day, a densely packed, randomly ordered letter strung together by a loose grammatical structure *was* good business style.

One result of this practice is that many fifteenth century legal and government documents look and sound like the contemporary business letters simply because a signed and sealed letter carried the weight of the sender's professional integrity, whether the letter was what we now consider "private" or not. Official orders from the English government were often classified as "Letters Patent," "Letter Close," or other similar titles because they were, for all practical purposes, letters from the king to his officials. The tendency to see all letters as official or business correspondence runs through all ranks of society, however.

The Style

A crucial factor in early business writing style worth remembering is that almost all letters were actually written by professional clerks and not by the sender. Today, of course, secretaries type virtually all business correspondence. In the fifteenth century and earlier all letters were handwritten, so the clerk was in effect the author of each letter going out (a few may have been dictated) and the sender was the editor. Medieval clerks were often churchmen (*clerk* is the same as modern *cleric—clerk* in its usual modern definition originated in the time when normally only men in holy orders were taught to write), but were trained to compose form letters and to write up correspondence from notes. The sender usually, but not always, signed his or her name and/or affixed a seal of some kind, but most frequently just edited the clerk's first draft.

The professional clerks influenced early business writing in another important way as well. These clerks were trained in a number of capacities besides writing letters, most notably in the drawing up of minor legal documents. Although they had to memorize large numbers of different legal forms for different types of documents, it is only natural that when writing up documents for which no form existed they would imitate documents for which one did. The result is that many fifteenth century business letters are easily recognized as having the same structure and even wording as many of the government and legal documents of the time, and since the distinction

between public and private was blurred at the time, this carry-over seemed quite unobjectionable.

The rhetorical style used both in letters and in legal documents is known as the *ars dictaminis*, or more often as the *dictamen*.[6] This style was the basis of virtually all scribal writing. Beginning in the twelfth century, the study of the *dictamen* was incorporated into the curricula of many European universities, although in England it was not part of the regular Arts degree program.[7] English students gathered around qualified teachers for what their modern counterparts would call a "cram" course, and then usually left the university, without a degree, to become professional clerks, scribes, bailiffs, stewards, or whatever occupation required skill in writing. As textbooks, students used *formularies*, books comprised mainly of model letters which the student imitated and adapted to the needs of the assignments. Formularies were not just for students, however, but were maintained by professional writing clerks as valued reference books.

Many Latin and French formularies have survived (although few have been printed), giving us an idea of the kind of training a scribe underwent. In the initial stages of his training, the scribe was required to study a very broad range of writing forms, from purely legal and diplomatic documents to sample letters from students to parents describing their heart-rending poverty and begging for money—a perennial subject. The formularies of one successful thirteenth century Oxford teacher of the *dictamen*, Thomas Sampson illustrate how Sampson adapted his model letters to the interests of his students.[8] Among his model letters are such useful topics as "A letter to a brother or a sister from a scholar in need of money," "A scholar writes to a friend asking him to repay a debt more quickly," "A monk asks his abbot to send pressing letters to the writer's friend asking them to supply money for books," and even "The University writes to the Pope on behalf of a Doctor of Laws who is seeking a Papal Provision." Sampson was no less prone than modern business communications teachers to draw up whimsical imaginary letters working themselves discreetly into their own texts, as is shown by the model letter "A father writes to his son instructing him to abandon the Arts course and place himself under Thomas Sampson."

Since the *dictamen* was the basis of letter-writing and of many legal and administrative forms, we should not overlook the influence of the law on early business writing. H. G. Richardson, the great historian of medieval English education, believed that the decline of the teachers of the *dictamen* and the decrease in the number of formularies after the middle of the fifteenth century was caused by the growth in London of what can loosely be called medieval law schools, the Inns of Court and the Inns of Chancery.[9] Since the law and letter-writing were already closely related and since both legal and letter-writing forms were already in use in England, this decline probably had

only a minimal effect on business communication, and the primary effect it had was simply to push business writing even more into the camp of the law. We know, for example, that royal Chancery clerks exerted themselves to no avail to rid their subordinates' hostels of apprentices to the law and other outsiders, some of whom were certainly professional clerks studying the *dictamen*.[10] The legal quarter of London—the home of the royal Chancery, the Inns of Court and Chancery, and the English legal profession—became the center of study for apprentice lawyers, royal clerks, and scribes, all working with one writing style as a basis: the *dictamen*. The legalistic tone of early business writing is no accident.

The rules of the *dictamen* were complex and are still inadequately described, especially in English. The form varied according to the intent of the letter, although private business letters of the time often obscure the subtle distinctions made by the king's secretaries of the royal Chancery clerks. Basically, an English business letter of the fifteenth century could be made up of the following formal sections:[11]

1. Address: in royal or aristocratic correspondence usually "right trusty and wellbeloved"; in private letters often "worshipful sir/madame," "worshipful and wellbeloved cousin/mother/brother," etc., "right worshipful sir and my dear master," and innumerable variations.
2. Salutation: "we greet you well", "I recommend me to you," etc.
3. Notification: "and we let you wit (know) that . . ."
4. Exposition: "whereas . . ." "for as much as . . ." etc.
5. Disposition or Injunction: in royal letters something like "wherefore we wol (will)"; in private correspondence usually beginning "wherefore," "therefore," etc.
6. Valediction: "and God have you in his keeping," or a similar phrase.
7. Attestation and Date: "Given at . . .," Written at . . .," and the date, sometimes noted by the year of the king's reign (i.e, "the sixth year of King Harry the Sixth").

To simplify it even more, the "body" of most letters was divided into two parts: the first section chiefly gave background, often describing or recalling to the reader's mind the immediate situation which caused the writer to send the letter; the second part told the reader what the writer wanted done in response to the situation just described. The logical progression of thought is unusually clear, much more so than in many modern business letters, particularly since the medieval reader would be accustomed to look for turns of thought at words like "whereas."

The following examples catch the flavor of the *dictamen* style and illustrate the consistency of that style throughout th fifteenth century:

I. Henry V to his brother, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, HI7:[12]

Right trusty and well beloved brother: We greet you often times well. And for as much as we understand that Master John Chaundeler that was Dean of Salisbury

[Cathedral] is chosen Bishop of the same church. Whereof we hold us well agreed [etc.]. Given under our signet [seal] in our host before Faloise the viii day of December.
(CSL/1542/9)

II. William Paston I to the Vicar of the Abbot of Cluny in France, 1430[13]

My right worthy and worshipful Lord, I recommend me to you. And for as much as I conceive verily that you are the vicar general in England of the worthy prelate the Abbot of Cluny and have his power in many things, and among others in the profession of monks . . . Whereupon I pray you . . . that it like your grace to grant of your charity by your worthy letters to the Prior of Thetford the authority and power as your minister and deputy to profess in due form the said unprofessed monks of Bromholm. Written at Norwich the _____ day of April.

III. John Paston III to John Paston I, 1462[14]

Right reverend and worshipful father: I recommend me to you, beseeching you lowly of your blessing. Please it you to have knowledge that my lord is purposed to send for my lady and is like to keep his Christmas here in Wales, for the king desireth him to do the same. Whereof I beseech you that you will vouchsafe to send me some money by the bearer hereof. . . . Written in haste at the castle of Holt upon Hallowmas day.

IV. The Earl of Oxford to Edmund Paston II, 1486-89[15]

Right wellbeloved, I greet you well. And whereas certain lands which late were Lord Scales' by title of inheritance be descended to me and my wellbeloved cousin William Tyndale, it is accorded betwixt me and my said cousin that the profits of the said lands shall neither be taken by my receiver nor his, but that an indifferent person shall take and receive that same profits. . . . Wherefore both I and my said cousin, having special confidence and trust in you, desire and heartily pray you to take the labor and pain at our costs and charges to take and receive the profits and all the said lands. . . . Written at Newmarket the viith day of April.

There were, of course, many variations. Letters of this type often contain long series of subordinate and coordinate clauses in an effort to maintain the two-part structure, and the efforts of modern editors to punctuate the stringy sentences of fifteenth-century letters often tend to obscure exactly what the letter-writer labored to preserve. In general, letters which follow patterns and set forms are less common in the family letters of the time (except for greeting and closing clauses) than in the letters preserved by the central and county governments, but most of the business writing which has come down to us derives from these government sources. It is important to recognize and isolate these clerical forms, which contributed heavily to the growth and respectability of business writing in English and added a touch of professionalism in business communication at a time when it was sorely needed.

Finally, we should note that another reason for the wordiness, vagueness, and apparent evasiveness which we often find in some of these letters is because, quite simply, information essential for understanding the letter was

never in it in the first place, but was delivered orally by the personal messenger who brought the letter, the usual practice in those days before professional postal services. An especially sensitive message could be communicated by putting part of it in writing and having part of it delivered by word of mouth—only the receiver could put the two parts together and comprehend the sender's whole meaning. Often we catch a hint of this practice when we read in a letter phrases like "as the bearer of this letter can inform you." Many medieval letters are just meandering and vague, of course, but we should not overlook the importance of the messenger in this early communication.

At this point the reader may well say with the Friar in the *Canterbury Tales*, "This is a long preamble of a tale!" Unlike novels, however, histories do not simply begin at a point convenient to the author or reader, and they have far too many loose ends and complex and sometimes dull digressions which must try the reader's patience. The preceding generalizations are intended more to ease us on our way than to provide an exhaustive discussion of the subject, and we should bear in mind that English letter writing is to a large extent the continuation of a Latin tradition which extends back to the Roman Empire. Once the patterns for business writing in English were established, however, they remained fairly constant for the next hundred years and, in the case of certain government forms, even longer.

For the purposes of discussion, business writing in fifteenth century England may be conveniently, if not wholly accurately, divided into government business writing on the one hand and private business writing on the other. The convenience arises from the fact that government documents have been carefully studied and classified; the division is partially inaccurate because contemporaries did not always see the difference between official and unofficial correspondence as sharply as we do. When dealing with government sources, however, it is much easier to identify not only the purpose of the letter but the office or department in which it was written as well. And it is to the government rather than the private business community that we must turn for the earliest use of business English.

Government Business Writing

Accustomed as we are in this century to the popular belief that government bureaucracies subvert, pervert, and distort our language, it may require some adjustment in our thinking to appreciate the leadership of the English royal administration during the 1420's in championing the use of the vernacular. Among the mercantile class, English was and always had been the principal *spoken* language of business, but conservative merchants waited to employ *written* English until the signal was given by royal authority.

And it was, in fact, from the king himself, the apex of the medieval social pyramid, that the signal came. One of the least appreciated facts in the history of our language is that the widespread use of English in public documents stems from one of England's most celebrated rulers, Henry V (1413-1422).[16] Reviving the sporadic warfare of the Hundred Years' War, Henry made what began as a minor raid into France in 1415 and almost by accident destroyed the flower of French chivalry at Agincourt. In 1417 he returned to France again with an even more ambitious plan in mind, to unite the thrones of France and England and eventually to lead the combined armies of the two countries on a great Crusade to the Holy Land. War was an expensive matter even in those days, and Henry, whatever his grandiose plans, depended to a large extent on the good will of the House of Commons to pay for his expedition. Probably as a propaganda measure aimed chiefly at the Commons in general and the burghers of London in particular, after August of 1417 Henry began sending virtually all of his correspondence home in English, the first English monarch to use written English regularly.

Henry sent back two major series of English correspondence, both of which are of the greatest importance in the history of English business communication. Four days after he landed in France, Henry sent back to England the first in a long series of Chancery warrants, letters which ordered his Chancery to issue various types of writs and other official documents—a very prestigious kind of inter-office memo, we might say. The English Chancery warrants continued until his death, along with other English documents which bolstered the prestige of English as the preferred language for correspondence, particularly the public announcement of what Henry considered his greatest work, the Treaty of Troyes of 1420. After Henry's unexpected death in 1422, the Lord Protectors of his infant son followed Henry's example, extending his policy of using English to an even larger number of official documents, including its much expanded use in the Rolls of Parliament. The evidence we have suggests that the wording and linguistic characteristics of Henry's Chancery warrants were imitated in Chancery documents after 1422, thereby making Henry (or his secretaries) one of the founders of Chancery standard, a written dialect which scholars believe to be the direct ancestor of modern Standard Written English.

A second series of letters, more important in private than in government business writing, was composed of progress bulletins addressed to the mayor, aldermen, and sheriffs of London.[17] This series is considerably less formal and stylized than the first and was probably intended as a morale booster, although on several occasions Henry was forced to request aids of various kinds from his loyal subjects. Because these were public documents, the citizens of London could for the first time see written English used by their king. They were, as we shall see, not slow to imitate him.

Henry's letters to his citizens are remarkable examples of good business English at its roots, for they show Henry (or his secretaries) to be quite adept at following many of the rules of what we now consider good business writing practices, even if the style seems quaint and the syntax difficult. The following example was sent to the Mayor and Aldermen of London while Henry was in France besieging Rouen. Notice in particular how Henry buffers his request with appeals to religious sentiments which at the same time suggest God's blessing on Henry's struggle and (by implication) on those who aid him. Henry is neither above mild flattery of his middle-class subjects nor beyond vaguely suggesting some royal favors to them when he gets home. For all that, he is direct and specific in his request.

> Right trusty and wellbeloved, we greet you well. And forasmuch as, in the name of Almighty God and in our right, with His Grace we have laid the seige before the city of Rouen (which is the most notable place in France save Paris), at which seige we greatly need refreshing for us and our host, and we have found you true lieges and subjects at all times to do all things that might do us worship and ease; whereof we can thank you right heartily and pray you effectually that in all haste you will arm as many small vessels as you can. [Here follow explicit directions for getting to Rouen by water.] . . . knowing well also that thereby you may do us right great pleasance and refreshing for all our above-said host, and given us cause to show therefor to you ever the better lordship in time coming, with the help of our Savior, the which we pray that He have you in his safe keeping. Given under our signet [seal] in our host before Rouen the X day of August [1419].[18]

After Henry's death in 1422, English began to appear among numerous types of royal writs, letters close, letters patent, inquisitions, and other classifications of government documents which can only with a stretch of the imagination be considered business writing, although they are often fine legal writing. Because of the enormous amount of English material which came from the government during the last part of the century, it may be more convenient to describe the major government offices which produced these documents and indicate where examples of more or less conventional business writing may be found.

The Chancery

Although today we associate the word "chancery" with law courts, the English Chancery in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was primarily responsible for drawing up documents to be issued with the Great Seal of England affixed as a sign of their authority and authenticity. The great Court of Chancery, for centuries the main court of equity in England, gradually evolved out of the legal tangles which naturally arose out of disputes inherent in the legal nature of Chancery work, but the court, then still in the early stages of its development, need not concern us here. The secretariat side of the Chancery, the copying and issuing of documents, is of enormous importance

in the growth of English business communication, however. Since all of the most prestigious public documents were issued by the Chancery, the style and to a certain extent the language found in the documents coming from the Chancery set the standard for the Englishmen who most affected English business communication—the lawyers and professional scribes.

The most recently studied major influence that the Chancery had on the use of English is on the standardization of the language.[19] One of the advantages which Latin had always enjoyed over English was that it was an established language which, in its written form at least, was universally understood by literate men and women throughout all of Western Europe and which, more importantly, could be used with precision in law and business. The same holds true to a lesser extent for French, at the time considered the true language of chivalry. English, unfortunately, was still emerging from several centuries as a second-class language even among Englishmen, and was scarcely thought fit to be a suitable language for commerce, even though Chaucer had used it for great poetry. Men spelled English exactly as it was pronounced—a praiseworthy practice in view of what has happened since, except that England was then divided into five major dialect groups, each of which often contained several different pronunciations and an untold number of spellings. A steward of a traveling noble might write ahead to a local merchant that his lord would require *eggs* at one castle, and in another part of England have to write to a corresponding merchant that his lord would require *eyren* at another castle. Obviously, it was easier to write to both in Latin, in which *ovi* meant the same from Sicily to Scotland.

Because of pressure on the one hand from the government, which was encouraging English apparently as a propaganda measure, and on the other hand from the legal profession, which needed a clear and exact language for its work, the Chancery was forced to develop a standardized legal language which could be used throughout England in all public documents requiring it. This written dialect, Chancery Standard, gradually came into use between 1422 and the early 1430's and was widespread by the middle of the century. Chancery Standard was based on the Midlands dialect, but blended several northern and southern characteristics to become a coherent, consistent written dialect on its own. Thus the London and Chaucerian *hem* and *her* gave way in normal written usage to the northern and modern *them* and *their*, the spellings, *whech*, *wich*, *whoch*, *qwech*, and others became regularized to *which*, and so on. Linguists are still arguing about just how Chancery Standard spread, but whether or not it is the basis for modern Standard Written English (as it probably is), it gave English a precision and respectability which, in prose at least, it had lacked.

The Chancery also influenced the style of business communication. While English poetry had reached a very high level in the last part of the preceeding century (a level from which it had declined after Chaucer's death in 1400), English literary prose was marked by confused grammar, illogical constructions, obscure reference of pronouns, and a general imprecision which made it inappropriate for business usage. The Chancery, with its legal emphasis, required directness, economy, and clarity, all of which it got by very carefully translating French and Latin models into its standardized English forms, forms which were then used throughout England. But as will presently be seen, the business letters we have preserved from outside the government decline in quality in direct proportion to the distance they originated away from government influences.

The Signet Office

Chronologically, the Signet Office used English before the Chancery did, since it was from the Signet Office that Henry V sent home his letters and Chancery warrants while fighting in France. The Signet Office, the king's private office staff, consisting of an officially designated Secretary and several clerks, followed English monarchs on their travels in England and abroad and prepared all of their personal correspondence, which was sealed with the king's signet ring or seal. The office went through several periods of decline in the fifteenth century (as did the kingship) but probably reached its height during the secretaryship of Thomas Bekyngton (1437-1443), whose correspondence has been edited and published in modern times.

Considered as business letters (which they are), the letters and Chancery warrants produced by the Signet Office are possibly the finest examples of English business writing in the entire century. Although their organization leaves something to be desired on occasion, the warrants and letters are remarkably clear and direct, with little of the awkward style so often found in the letters of private persons, even though the latter often follow the familiar *dictamen* structure favored by professional scribes.

The Chancery warrants drawn up by the Signet Office constitute an important body of inter-office correspondence and are among the better examples of early government business writing. Chancery warrants were written up on the king's orders, sometimes evidently dictated by him, and then sent to the Chancery, which used them as authorization for issuing documents under the Great Seal. Many of these warrants have been preserved and published in scattered sources. They are notable for their conciseness and lack of the florid, formal language one often finds in more public utterances. One example from Henry's Signet Office (1417) has already been given. Another from the same year is addressed to the Bishop of Durham, his Chancellor:

> Worshipful father in God. for as much as we have ordained and assigned our wellbeloved servant Robert Rodyngton to be surveyor of the making of our towers at Portsmouth. We will that you do make under our Great Seal a commission to the same Robert such as you think reasonable and necessary for the good and hasty speed of our forsaid works, during while it pleases us. Given in our town of Caen the vth day of September under our signet [seal].[20]

The Signet Office also produced the king's personal correspondence, which was, of course, hardly intimate. Since kings, by their position, did not have to use the excessively verbose, obsequious, and fawning style affected by lesser mortals, their letters are sometimes revealing in their subtle approach to audience response.

The Privy Seal and Other Government Sources

Besides the Chancery and the Signet Office, several other government offices produced business correspondence in English, but without the influence on later business writing that the first two exercised. The office of the Privy Seal could issue certain writs having the force of law, but this office primarily dealt with writs authorizing issues under the Great Seal. Unfortunately, few Privy Seal documents have been preserved, and these have never been widely printed or studied. The Exchequer, the financial arm of the British government, maintained extensive records, comprised largely of accounts and copies of Latin documents. The records of the various branches of the royal courts are worthy of a modern bureaucracy in their staggering bulk.

Private Business Correspondence

When we consider the ephemeral nature of most business correspondence, we should count ourselves fortunate that any business letters from this remote time survived at all. That so many have been preserved can be attributed once again to that great catalyst of practical English prose, the law, and in particular to the English concepts of common law and Equity. Because English law depends so heavily on precedents and encourages the proliferation of lawsuits, well-to-do Englishmen were prone to preserve their business correspondence, while law enforcement officers were equally prone to confiscate it. Most of the letters described below come from letter collections made by families out of desire for or fear of a law suit. Some of the collections, like the Cely letters, were seized by royal officials, and became part of the public records; others, like the Paston papers, remained with their families long enough to arouse the interest of eighteenth and nineteenth century antiquarians. One can only guess at the amount of business correspondence destroyed between the fifteenth and eighteenth

centuries, during which time old correspondence without clear historical significance was casually destroyed, shredded into bookbindings, or used to stuff the mouths of the king's cannons.

The letters described below are the major printed editions of private business letters in English from the fifteenth century. All were originally published for their historical value, although more recently linguists have made the most fruitful use of them. A few other stray letters appear in special collections like Chambers and Daunt's *Book of London English* (see below). Unfortunately most of them are unpublished, many buried in the files of Britain's Public Record Office. In fact, what may be the very earliest English business letters lie there unpublished: some brief letters and memos written about 1408 by Robert Frye, a clerk of the Privy Seal Office who dealt in moneylending on the side. Perhaps some day they will be published.[21] For now, however, we must content ourselves with the printed collections:

The Paston Letters

The most famous and the most extensive of all the collections of fifteenth-century family letters (and deservedly so), the Paston papers are our most valuable source for fifteenth century social history. The Pastons were a well-to-do Norfolk family whose ample correspondence to and from the great and small of the land fills two fat volumes in the standard Oxford version edited by Norman Davis.[22] The English letters begin in the 1420's and extend into the first quarter of the next century, although all but a handful were written between 1450 and 1490. The Paston family's unhappy task was to keep itself prosperous and well-connected during one of the most unstable and violent periods in English history, and its collected letters tell a story worthy of an historical novel, at least to the patient reader.

Considered as business correspondence, the Paston letters reveal something less of the trends of the age than do the Cely letters, discussed below. The Pastons were deeply involved in the biggest business of pre-industrial Europe—landowning—but most of their correspondence pertains to the family's legal, political, and personal entanglements rather than to the daily affairs of business. On the other hand, the purely business letters are usually detailed and carefully written and are obviously the product of considerable thought. Stylistically, most of the letters follow the *dictamen* closely. Three examples have been given earlier.

For students of business writing, however, the recent Oxford edition by Davis has several important aids to scholarship. Besides writing a superb introduction with full details about the letters and their writers, Davis has carefully studied the handwriting and has separated the autograph letters from those written by scribes. Among other advantages, this division enables us to see how much clearer and more fluent the professionally written letters

are than those done by members of the family. In addition, Davis has separated draft letters from the finished products, thereby providing us with a unique chance to see the mind of a medieval letter-writer in the process of writing. For these reasons alone, the Paston letters are an unexampled source for the study of early business writing.

The Cely Letters

The Cely Letters (1472-1488) are important as the most extensive collection of real business letters from outside of government sources and also as the only collection of letters by genuine middle-class merchants, as opposed to landed gentry involved in land speculation and absentee agriculture.[23] Unlike the Pastons, the Celys depended exclusively on their business skills to get along in the world, in their case the world of the wool trade. Also unlike the Pastons, they wrote most of their own letters in their own hands, thereby preserving the indescribable chaos of English spelling among the merchant class of the fifteenth century.

The Cely letters are more strictly business letters than any of the other private collections of the time and are invaluable for the glimpses the Celys give us of the economic practices of the wool trade. Compared to the Paston letters, the Cely letters are fairly rough-and-ready affairs. The Celys are usually too busy to spend much time with niceties of style and usually get to the point as soon as possible. Because most of the letters are among family members, there are few attempts at what we would consider sound business letter policies. Bad news, for example, was normally undisguised and unsweetened. On the other hand, the Celys show at least a nodding acquaintance with the formalities of contemporary letter-writing. They use several of the predictable greetings and closings, once again in imitation of the legal formulas, and in several letters attempt to follow the two-part structure favored in so many professionally written letters. Most of their letters are not particularly well organized, but they made an effort to indicate a change in subject matter by such catch-words as *Sir* or *furthermore*. Like most contemporary letters, these seem formal and distant to us for the most part, even though human touches inevitably appear, as when William Cely apologizes for a previous letter he wrote in "lewd [i.e., illiterate] and untrue English . . . for at that time my mind was not quiet, for I was sick; but whatever I wrote, I meant well."[24] The Cely letters at least have the advantage of being relatively free of the bombast and wordiness of many contemporary letters, even if they cannot honestly be said to be very absorbing to the casual reader.

The Cely collection, preserved, as usual, because of a law suit, contains a variety of letters and memoranda among family members and business associates working severally in England and the Low Countries. Some of the letters by these associates are probably more reflective of contemporary

business letter-writing than the letters among family members, which tend to be more direct and full of (to us) difficult personal allusions. A typical family letter from William Cely in London to George Cely at Calais (which nevertheless shows the influence of the professional letter-writing style) runs as follows:

> Right worshipful sir, after due recommendation I lowly recommend me unto you, letting you wit [know] that, by the grace of God, you shall receive off the *Thomas* of New Hythe [Robard Ewen, master] one half pack [i.e., 240 wool fells], 115 fells, and a little fardel [bundle] of fells that is allowed for 3 fells with the fells of Thomas Bettson, and the lettle fardel lieth just to the mast uppermost to my master's fells; which fells ye must receive and pay the freight. No more unto you at this time, but Jhesu keep you. Written at London the second day of November [1481]. (p. 119)

Another letter in the Cely collection, this one from someone not in the family, shows a nice awareness of the good judgment which should be integral to all business writing:

> Right reverend and worshipful sir I recommend me to you with all my heart, desiring to hear of your welfare, the which I beseech God to preserve to his blessed pleasure and to your great profit, both of body and of soul. Sir, it may please you to know that my mistress your mother and my masters, your two brothers, my *em* William Maryon, and all your household fare well and my mistress your mother is in good health (thanked be Jesus) and merry; God keep her long so. Also, sir, please it you to know that my *em* and I are agreed that I should have £40 that should be delivered by you. Sir, it is so that I intended to be with you Easter week, but I have a hindrance that caused me to tarry, and have not done so. But sir, I purpose to be at the Bruges market if I may, and I pray you that it may be ready when I come. . . . Written in haste.
>
> By your own
> Robert Eyryk (pp. 139-40)

The writer, Robert Eyryk, smoothly leads in the receiver, George Cely, by first giving an extended greeting in the conventional style and then thoughtfully giving news about the Cely family (health was a subject of riveting interest in those disease-ridden times), so that almost half the letter prepares Cely for the request for cash payment at a specific place, which is worked in quite effortlessly. Eyryk also subtly recalls his relationship with Cely's business partner, his *em* (uncle) William Maryon. Eyryk's letter reminds us that good business writing is merely the application of good taste, common sense, and tact, qualities which can be found in any historical era, however different from our own.

The Plumpton Letters

The Plumpton Letters are similar to those of the Pastons, with the exception that they are preserved only in seventeenth-century transcripts and that they are historically and linguistically less interesting.[25] For the most part

they chronicle the numerous business transactions of a well-to-do landowning family. Stylistically they are no better or worse than most specimens of early English letter-writing, but they are of great interest in illustrating the gradual changes in English letter-writing style between the time of the first letter (1461) and the last (1552). The earlier letters closely follow the style of the *dictamen*, particularly so in the letters sent to the family from the great nobles, including the famous Earl of Warwick ("the Kingmaker"), Richard, Duke of Gloucester (the future Richard III), and Henry Percy, fourth Earl of Northumberland. In the 1480's and 1490's the *dictamen* style begins to disintegrate into a looser, more pliable style, although the *dictamen* continued to exercise a strong influence in private letter-writing until far into the next century.

Here, for example, is a letter to Sir Robert Plumpton from his cousin Edward, showing, among other things, that by 1497 even the upper classes and their secretaries were beginning to break away from the inflexible requirements of the earlier style:

> In my heartiest and most humble wise I recommend me unto your mastership and to my singularly good lady. Sir, it is so that certain lovers and friends of mine in London hath brought me unto the sight of a gentlewoman, a widow of the age of forty years and more and of good substance: first, she is goodly and beautiful, womanly and wise as ever I knew, none other dispraised, of a good stock and worshipful. Her name is Agnes. She hath in charge but one gentlewoman to her daughter, of twelve years of age. She has twenty marks of good land within three miles of London and a royal manor built thereupon to give or sell at her pleasure. She has in coin in old nobles £100, in royals £100, in debts £40, in plate £110, with other goods of great value, she is worth £1,000 besides her land. Sir, I am bold upon your good mastership, as I have ever been, and if it please God and you that this matter take effect, I shall be able to deserve all things done and past: she and I are agreed in our mind and all one, but her friends that she is ruled by desire of me a jointure 20 marks more than my lands come to; and thus I answered them, that your mastership is so good a master to me that you gave to my other wife 12 marks for her jointure to Stodley Roger, and now that it will please your said mastership to endue this woman in some lordship of yours of 20 marks during her life, such as they will be pleased with, and for this my friends offer to be bound for £1,000. (pp. 123-24)

Not much of a passionate declaration of love, perhaps, but a fluid, direct, and tactful letter by the somewhat fulsome standards of 1497.

The Shillingford Correspondence

The documents of John Shillingford, mayor of Exeter, were discovered at Exeter in the nineteenth century in an old cupboard in the Council Chamber and under the tiles of the Guildhall roof.[26] Like most collections of fifteenth century documents, the Shillingford papers were preserved—if that is the word—because they recorded a legal squabble, in this case one by the mayor

and commonality against the Bishop of Exeter, Edmund Lacy. The case was typically medieval in that it was over the relative rights of church and state over certain properties in Exeter, but it seems fairly apparent that the good Bishop was what we would now call a "slum lord" and was using his weak claims of clerical privileges to excuse himself from turning over his unsavory tenants to the civic authorities. The so-called "Shillingford Letters" are really a miscellaneous collection of memoranda, instructions, pleas, and rough drafts written by everyone from obscure local priests up to the Archbishop of Canterbury and are only of intermittent interest as business writing. Most of them follow the various forms of the English *dictamen* reasonably closely, differing little in style from the Stoner or Cely letters.

Shillingford's own letters, however, may be the most lively and entertaining of the fifteenth century. To judge from his writing, Shillingford must have had a striking and memorable personality, a personality which he transfers to his letters forcefully. He was affable to his betters without being fawning, witty yet direct with his peers without being scornful or overbearing. A literate, almost literary man, he peppers his letters with Latin quotations, some of them clearly for humorous effect; a shrewd judge of men and manners, he fills his reports from London to his colleagues at home with descriptive details of his numerous meetings with the great of the land, often adding realistic bits of dialogue for effect. During the prosecution of the suit, for example, Shillingford describes his method of dealing with the Chancellor, John Stafford, Archbishop of Canterbury:

> That day I was at Lambeth with my lord at mass, and offered my candle to my lord's blessed hand, I kneeling down offering my candle. My lord, with a laughing face upon me, said heartily, "Grant mercy, mayor!" That same day I stayed there for supper by my lord's commandment; I met my lord at the high table's end coming to supper, and as soon as ever he saw me he took me fast by the hand and thanked me enough. I said to my lord that it was a simple thing, considering his rank, to say once, "grant mercy," but if I had been at home at this fare he should have had better stuff and other things etc. I went forth with him to the middle of hall, he standing there in his estate against the fire a great while, with two bishops, the two Chief Justices and other lords, knights, and squires and a great multitude of common people, I kneeling by him; and after recommendation I moved him of our case quickly, as time asked, and especially as the two Chief Justices were there, beseeching him before their departing to call them to him for our matter. (p. 37)

One has only to read the chronicles of the period to realize how rare such human touches are in extant nonliterary works.

Another human touch, this one certainly unique in fifteenth-century letters, is Shillingford's temper tantrum directed at one John Germyn, who had failed to deliver some fish Shillingford had intended to give to the Chancellor. In words worthy of Chaucer's Host, Shillingford rages against both Germyn and his carrier, for Shillingford is certain they will accuse one

another of the oversight: "Cristes curse have they both and seye ye 'amen' *non sine merito* [not without reason]; bot ye dar sey so, thynke so, thynke so!" Shillingford admonishes Germyn that in the course of his civic duties Germyn should do whatever he can "do, braule, bragge and brace, lye and swear to," especially to see that a certain lane be cleaned, "for there lieth many oxen hedes and bonys, [so] that they be removed away for the nonys ayenst my comying—as sone as y may, by cokkis bones!" (p. 23).

But Shillingford is more than a mere specimen of that rare breed, a real medieval "character," nor are his letters of interest only to the social historian. He knew what his readers wanted and expected—news, vigorously and accurately written. He had, moreover, a sense of business tact which many a later business writer might envy. Consider, for example, the letter in which Shillingford, still away from home, writes to his fellow citizens of his disgust at the reply to his legal deposition by the bishop's lawyers, "in which articles as it appeareth they have spat out the utmost and worst venom that they could say or think of me." But he says, he is

> right merry and fare right well, ever thanking God and mine own purse, and I lying on my back at writing of this right early, merrily singing a merry song, and that is this, "Come no more at our house, come, come, come." I will not die neither for sorrow not for anger, but be merry and fare right well, while I have money; but that is likely to be scarce with me, considering the business and cost that I have had, and like to have, and yet I had with me £20 and more, by my troth, whereof in truth not much I've spent yet, but like etc. Construe ye what ye will. Item, that Thomas Montague should send me £11 (etc.). (p. 16)

Shillingford goes son to press all of his old associates, including poor Germyn, to pay him what they owe him. One could hardly ask for a smoother "buffer" in a demand for money.

The Stoner and Trevelyan Letters and Papers

The Stoner letters and papers are again similar in most respects to the Paston material, differing chiefly in being of less historical and social interest.[27] Most of the 333 documents printed in the standard edition are letters dealing with the considerable business affairs of the Stoner family of Oxfordshire. The items in English begin immediately after 1420 and end about 1483, when the papers were seized by royal officials after Sir William Stoner joined in the Duke of Buckingham's rebellion against Richard III. Most of the letters concern the usual affairs of important landholders—rents, debts, marriages, lawsuits, and politics—and resemble both in the form and content the Paston and Plumpton correspondence.

The Trevelyan letters are well-known to historians but have only an occasional letter of business interest.[28] The fifteenth-century items are mostly legal documents; the letters themselves are almost all sixteenth-century.

Summary

Each of these collections offers potential for the researcher in the history of early business writing, but each has accompanying drawbacks. The Paston letters span virtually the whole fifteenth century and are available in a splendid modern edition; however, the researcher must separate the business letters from the purely personal and political, not an easy task with this bulky collection. On the other hand, the Cely letters are all genuine business letters, but cover a brief period only (1472-1488). The Stoner letters and papers cover the broadest period (1290-1483), but the English material stops just short of the final phase of the *dictamen* style. In contrast, the Trevelyan papers begin in English about where the Stoner papers leave off, but are the least interesting. The Plumpton letters also begin late (1461), but extend in to the beginnings of the Renaissance. The Shillingford papers are the most interesting in style but also the narrowest in scope and time (1447-1450).

The collections also vary in accessibility. Only the Paston letters and papers are available in a modern English "translation," so the reader must be prepared to deal with Middle English throughout. The Paston and Cely letters have superior modern editions, but the rest are printed only in the old Camden Society series, one going back as far as 1839, and can be found only in a minority of university libraries.

Other Sources

It should be remembered that these six are only the major printed collections of private business letters. Many more letters and other forms of early business writing lie buried in historical and linguistic studies awaiting the critical eye of the business writing historian. For these other sources I refer the reader to the following essay on "Researching Early Business Writing in English." The printed sources, however, are dwarfed by the unprinted material lying in British archives. Because of the peculiarities of the English system of justice, mentioned earlier, Great Britain has the most extensive public records in Europe. This is not the place to describe the potentialities of the unpublished material, but it should be recognized that the definitive history of business writing before the eighteenth century can only be written by scholars with the patience, energy, time, and funding to sift through the English public records. The real story is to be found there.

Conclusion

The earliest phase of English business writing illustrates, above all, the dangers inherent in slavishly accepting the received opinion on how to write a business letter. It may be true, in the words of a noted scholar of medieval studies, that "if the language seems to the modern ear tiresomely verbose and

artificial, it is only fair to remember that every age has its own methods of getting business through." Yet it is also fair to remember that the needs of early business writers outgrew the capacity of the teachers and theorists to adapt to those needs. Long before the dawn of the English Renaissance, business writing had changed to meet the practical needs of the business community, and changed without the sanctions of received opinion. Then, as now, the technical, social, and human challenges of a more complex new age casually pushed aside the carefully codified assumptions of its predecessor.

Notes and References

1. William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Newcomes*, Chapter 39 or Vol. II, Chapter 1, depending on edition.

2. A condensed and largely rewritten version of this article appeared in *The Journal of Business Communication*, 17, No. 3 (1980), 20-31.

3. London life in the late fourteenth century is described in D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Chaucer's London* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968).

4. *The Cely Letters, 1472-1488*, ed. Alison Hanham, Early English Text Society, No. 273 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 127-28. This and most other Middle English material have been modernized.

5. For a printed example, see *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, ed. E. W. W. Veal, 4 vols, Bristol Record Society, Nos. 2, 8, 16, 18 (Bristol: BRS, 1931-53).

6. For the *dictamen*, see James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 194-268; Charles Sears Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic* (1928; rpt. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1969), pp. 206-77; Luella M. Wolff, "A Brief History of the Dictamen: Medieval Origins of Business Letter Writing," *The Journal of Business Communication*, 16, No. 2 (1979), 3-11.

7. H. G. Richardson, "Letters of the Oxford *Dictatores*," in *Formularies Which Bear on the History of Oxford*, c. 1204-1420, ed. H. E. Salter, W. A. Pantin, H. G. Richardson, Oxford Historical Society, N.S., No. 5 (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1942), p. 333.

8. H. G. Richardson, "Business Training in Medieval Oxford," *American Historical Review*, 46 (1940-41), pp. 259-80.

9. Richardson, "Business Writing," p. 274.

10. T. F. Tout, "The Household of the Chancery and Its Disintegration," in *Essays in History Presented to Reginald Lane Poole*, ed. H. W. C. Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), pp. 46-85.

11. Adapted from Hubert Hall, *Studies in English Official Historical Documents* (1908; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1959), pp. 275-76. There were innumerable variations according to the purpose and addressee of the letter.

12. Public Record Office, C81/1542/9. Printed in *An Anthology of Chancery English*, eds. John H. Fisher, Malcolm Richardson, and Jane L. Fisher, (University of Tennessee Press, 1984), p. 88.

13. *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), I, 13-14.

14. *Paston Letters*, I, 522-23.

15. *Paston Letters*, II, 491.

16. For Henry V's contribution see Malcolm Richardson, "Henry V, The English Chancery, and Chancery English," *Speculum*, 55 (1980).

17. Printed in R. W. Chambers and Marjorie Daunt, *A Book of London English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1391), pp. 61-89.

18. Chambers and Daunt, pp. 73-74.

19. See John H. Fisher, "Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century," *Speculum*, 52 (1977), 870-99, and *An Anthology of Chancery English*, Introduction.

20. Chancery Warrant, C81/1364/36. Printed in *An Anthology of Chancery English*, p. 85.

21. At present classified as E28/29/44-77, in the Exchequer T. R. Council and Privy Seal file. Frye's letters are discussed in A. L. Brown, "The Privy Seal Clerks in the Early Fifteenth Century," in *The Study of Medieval Records*, ed. D. A. Bullough and R. L. Story (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 260-81. Most of the "letters" are little more than memoranda.

22. See No. 13, above.

23. See No. 4, above.

24. *Cely Letters*, p. 188.

25. *Plumpton Correspondence*, ed. Thomas Stapleton, Camden Society 1st Series, No. 4 (London, 1839).

26. *Letters and Papers of John Shillingford, Mayor of Exeter, 1447-50*, ed. Stuart A. Moore, Camden Society, 2nd Series, No. 2 (London, 1871).

27. *The Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483*, ed. Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, Camden Society, 3rd Series, Nos. 29-30 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1919).

28. *Trevelyan Papers Prior to A.D. 1558*, ed. J. Payne Collier, Camden Society, 1st Series, No. 67 (London, 1857).

Methodology for Researching Early Business Writing in English

Malcolm Richardson
The University of Alabama in Huntsville

Before the present time—indeed, right up to the publication of this very volume—the history of business communication occupied an uncomfortable, dark, and neglected academic position in an obscure gray area somewhere between the disciplines of pure history and pure rhetoric. But communicators have recently become interested in their past and in finding the place of business writing in the rhetorical traditions of the Western world. We who have written on the subject have worked independently in our own narrow fields of expertise. Until now, no one has collected our individual efforts in an attempt to piece together a coherent historical picture out of isolated fragments. And so now we begin, tenuously, with the intimidating knowledge that no one has yet been formally trained to do what we are doing. We hardly know what to expect.

The following essay outlines a methodology for researching one part of this history, the narrow but critical century between 1420 and 1520 when business writing in England really began. Before 1420, business writing in England was either in Latin or in French; after that date came a flood of vernacular business correspondence from ordinary merchants on up the social ladder. By following the approach I suggest, future researchers may be able to avoid many time-consuming mistakes caused by the kind of clumsy groping I had to endure when I first began this study.

I have assumed that the hypothetical researcher comes equipped with the curiosity and energy to search out sometimes obscure volumes, but without post-graduate training in history. Consequently, the essay moves from general background material toward specialized collections of medieval letters and business writing so that the researcher may systematically and painlessly enter this rewarding but initially perplexing world.

The Starting Point: Studies of Early English Letter Writing

One of the ironies of the study of early English business writing is that while plenty of medieval English letters are in print, no one has very much to say about them except as they illustrate history or linguistics. My own essay in this volume on "The First Century of English Business Writing" gives an overview of early business letters and is the only examination of medieval letters in English from a business writing perspective. Of earlier studies on letters in general, the most thorough and scholarly discussions are in C. L. Kingsford's *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* [for this and subsequent references see the Bibliography at the end of this article] and in Kingsford's chapter on "English Letters and the Intellectual Ferment" in *Prejudice and Promise in XVth Century England*. Kingsford provides a sane and balanced sketch of all of the significant letters of the time and is an essential starting point. A narrower study is H. G. Richardson's "Business Training in Medieval Oxford," which despite its title is mainly about the crash course in business letter writing given during the fourteenth century at Oxford.

The more popular studies about early letter writing are less helpful. Most are impressionistic and lack the careful research necessary to carry future researchers on to the next step. Laetitia Lyell's *A Medieval Post Bag* is the most thorough and contains samples from the most important fifteenth-century letter collection. Other studies, such as Maude Hansche's *The Formulative Period of English Familiar Letter-Writers* and Jean Robertson's *The Art of Letter Writing*, are more useful for what they have to say about the Renaissance.

The Style of Early English Letters: The *Dictamen* and its Users

Having gained a general knowledge about the kinds of letters available, the researcher next needs to develop an awareness of the rhetorical style in which they are nearly all written, the *dictamen*. No one can hope to understand the genuine subtleties of the best medieval letters without understanding the purely medieval approach to writing letters by elaborate rules and precepts. Unfortunately, little has been written in English about the *dictamen* and even less about the *dictamen* as practiced in England. Researchers may wish to pursue some of the works on the *dictamen* listed in James J. Murphy's *Bibliography of Medieval Rhetoric*, but for most, the chapter in Murphy's own *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* will be a sufficient introduction. Charles Sears Baldwin's *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic* is something of a classic

(Chapter VIII is on the *dictamen*), but many will find Murphy more lucid. Also essential is Charles Homer Haskins' *Studies in Medieval Culture*, which duplicates some of the material covered by Murphy but also has information about the teaching of the *dictamen* on the continent. Our knowledge about the training in England is less secure, but H. G. Richardson's "Letters of the Oxford *Dictatores*" complements his "Business Training in Medieval Oxford," mentioned above. A recent investigation of the relation of the Latin *dictamen* to business writing is Luella Wolff's "Brief History of the Dictamen."

Since the writing clerks who practiced the *dictamen* and who wrote practically all medieval letters were the first professional business writers, business communicators should perhaps look upon them as revered ancestors. We know very little about them, however, and most of what we know is inferential. In fifteenth-century England their trade was centered around the legal quarter of London and the royal Chancery. These scribes, most of whom were in some kind of holy orders, mixed freely with lawyers and royal clerks and learned the *dictamen* through apprenticeship. The life led by these clerks is best described in Herman Cohen's *History of the English Bar*, a book which has an emphasis very different from business writing, as the title implies. Another helpful essay is T. F. Tout's "The Household of the Chancery and its Disintegration," which describes how the Chancery clerks (business writers, among other duties) established their own training schools. A more recent study, John H. Fisher's "Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English," while a little technical, shows how this early business and government writing helped to standardize our written language.

The Purpose of Medieval Letters

Once the researcher has a basic grasp of the *dictamen*, he or she needs to examine the purposes to which it was put. Medieval letters were usually carefully prepared with an eye to intent and audience; most were basically formulaic, constructed rather than composed from scratch by a scribe who understood how the *dictamen* varied subtly according to purpose and reader. The most authoritative works on the English *dictamen* and the various classifications of the letters are Hubert Hall's *Formula Book of English Official Historical Documents* and his *Studies in English Official Historical Documents*. Regrettably, these are not easy reading for the layman, but behind Hall's forbidding technical jargon and condescending tone (he wrote the books for graduate students) one can find remarkable insights into the mysteries of the English *dictamen* and the origins of English familiar letters.

Since early business letter-writers followed the stylistic example of the royal administration, an understanding of the basic forms of government

documents is useful, perhaps essential. A simple run-down of these forms and the royal administrative practices is in V. H. Galbraith's brief *Introduction to the Use of Public Records*, a more approachable work than Hall's but not directly concerned with letter writing. More detailed, if correspondingly more difficult in its use of technical terms, is H. C. Maxwell-Lyte's *Historical Notes on the Use of the Great Seal of England*.

Besides the above, numerous works have been written on "diplomatic," the study of ancient and medieval government correspondence. For these, the reader should turn to the chapter on the *dictamen* in Murphy's *Bibliography*. Most, however, are old, hard-to-find, and usually in French or German.

Sources for the Original Letters

Once prepared to face early English letters with an understanding of their style and purpose, the researcher will be able to grasp more fully what they meant to the original writer and receiver. No longer appearing simply as letters in a quaint but basically crude style, no longer seeming like random collections of stock phrases, these early letters will reveal themselves to the reader as often being more subtle and carefully worded than many a modern textbook model. But first our well-prepared researcher must *find* this correspondence, and at this point at least three problems intervene:

1. The researcher must redefine "business correspondence" in medieval terms.

2. Many of the best collections of letters are found only in Middle English editions.

3. Many of the best sources are difficult to find, even in the better university libraries.

The first problem the researcher will have to settle to his or her own satisfaction. I have already given my thoughts on the subject in a preceding article. The second problem cannot be overcome so quickly, although anyone hardy enough to struggle through Chaucer should have little trouble with most early letters since they all date from after Chaucer's death when the language was slightly more standardized.

A good starting place for examining early letters might be a modernized version of the Paston letters, with the understanding that many of the "letters" are actually draughts, notes, memoranda, wills, etc., and cannot be considered finished letters. The standard edition of the Paston correspondence by Norman Davis should also be consulted. Laetitia Lyell's *A Medieval Post Bag* contains modernized versions of many important fifteenth-century letters, and Steele's *King's Letters* is at least worth a glance. However, most of the letters in the modernized editions are chosen for their historical and social interest and are less representative of typical business correspondence.

Two important and generally available Middle English editions should also be examined. Chambers and Daunt's *Book of London English* prints an impressive assortment of letters, memoranda, guild records, and a truly wide range of medieval business writing. Although prepared as a case book for linguists, it also contains a glossary and sufficient background notes. Henry Ellis' *Original Letters Illustrative of English History*, an eleven-volume set originally published between 1824 and 1846 but reprinted in 1969, illustrates the trends in letter writing over several centuries.

Two rarer works are valuable in that they transcribe a variety of records from the royal administration and give a more inclusive view of medieval business writing as a whole than do the collections of letters. Sir Harris Nicolas' seven-volume *Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council* shows an unparalleled picture of the government at work. As with the Chambers and Daunt book mentioned above, we get the whole range of medieval business writing from hastily scribbled minutes to formal indentures. Bentley's *Excerpta Historica* is briefer and more selective, but still shows an interesting variety of forms and styles. Less valuable than the two preceding works but still instructive is *Official Correspondence of Thomas Bekyngton*, letters by the king's secretary.

The broadest collection of medieval letters is still Thomas Rymer's mammoth *Foedera*. Printed in several editions between the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this overwhelming piece of editing is now available in a modern reprint which must be used with a nineteenth-century *Syllabus*. For all its unwieldy size and several languages, *Foedera* is still the most comprehensive source for medieval correspondence, business and otherwise.

The collections of family letters are essential in that they show the daily business correspondence of well-to-do families with no attempt to edit out letters because of a lack of historical interest. Since they are discussed in the preceding article, I will omit further discussion, noting only that the Cely letters are our only surviving collection of business letters by ordinary merchants, as opposed to landed gentry.

Bibliographies

The works mentioned above do not by any means exhaust the possibilities. To me they present the most fruitful sources for beginning the study of early business correspondence in English; more intrepid researches may wish to go farther afield. While not always tailored to the needs of the researcher in business writing history, two bibliographies contain reliable and helpful material which suggest additional studies and, furthermore, are all we have.

Edgar Graves' *Bibliography of English History to 1485*, a magnificent historical bibliography in its own right, lists most of the important collections

of letters and has annotated entries giving accurate descriptions for many items. The index, however, is not always suited to the needs of business communications research.

Texts and Calendars has no index, making it cumbersome and time-consuming to use; but anyone searching for further medieval business communication will find it here—after a search. The book lists in order all of the serial publications by English and Welsh historical societies printed before the early 1980's. Since many of the most important collections of letters have been edited by members of these societies—and the old Camden Society printed the only editions to date of the Trevelyan, Shillingford, Stoner, and Plumpton correspondence, for example—*Texts and Calendars* is a gold mine for uncovering lost examples of business writing from the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century. One literally has to thumb through it, however.

Conclusion

Those who have followed me thus far must feel either the distress of realizing how much remains to be done or the exhilaration of finding the coastline of a new world of knowledge. Researching early business writing will require the kind of patient, painstaking research that rarely yields quick or glittering results but often produces the most satisfying and long-lasting scholarship. This research will not be for everyone, nor need it be. But the purpose of history, or scholarship, and of learning is not simply the gratuitous preservation of the past, but the understanding of the present and perhaps the future. Toward that goal let us work.

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A 16th Century Work on Communication: Precursor of Modern Business Communication

Herbert W. Hildebrandt
University of Michigan

The historical roots of business communication, either theory or practice, cannot be easily traced. Instead, numerous works over time have contributed a momentum to theory and practice which continues to the present. Thus if such works exist it seems proper to view them—even for their brief prevailing value—noting their contribution to the history of business communication.

The genesis for theories of communication rests on the ancient oral rhetorical world with poetics, grammar, logic, particularly the art of letter writing (*dictamen*), borrowing heavily from those oral concepts. In this essay our focus is on the latter: *dictamen, ars distandi*, or *dictaminis*—man using the written word to communicate.

Works have traced the influences and theories of ancient, medieval, and Renaissance rhetorics. Few have given extensive scholarly time to *dictamen*. Only recently the *The Journal of Business Communication* carried an article by Luella Wolff[1] who briefly noted the place of letter writing in the Medieval period, an immediate precursor of the theory and work I wish to discuss.

Today the visual and oral has replaced, in part, the extraordinary power of the written word. Not so in the Renaissance. Then idea movement was oral and written, the latter the medium for churchman, nobleman, or merchant. In that period there appeared in English a seminal work that suggested theories, requirements, and examples of good written composition: Angell Day's *The English Secretary or Method of Writing Epistles and Letters*.[2]

Day wrote one of the earliest English statements on business communication, namely, the letter as it should be composed by secretaries and others in the 16th century. What follows will be divided into three parts: Angell Day as a writer of his period; etymological mutations that have occurred in the term secretary; and the 1599 edition of Day which represented both a theoretical and pragmatic work for communicators of his day.

Angell Day

No biography on Day exists. Only scattered secondary sources give us any idea as to his position as a writer in the Renaissance. What then was his training and schooling for writing the first original work in English on letter writing and the responsibilities of a secretary?

The *Stationers' Register* supplies the hint that early he may have become acquainted with the duties of an office inasmuch as his father was a clerk:

> *Thomas Duxsell* Angell Day the sonne of Thomas Daye of London parysshe clerke hath put hym self apprentice to *Thomas Duxsell* Cytizen and Stacioner of London from the feaste of the byrth of our Lorde god [25 December] 1563 Twelve yeres . . .[3]

Only conjucture lies beyond the above. One knows that the apprenticeship to Duxsell lasted from 1563 to 1675, during which time Day read manuscripts while setting them in type. He obviously was exposed to other publications which passed through his employer's hands.

Of his precise schooling we can only speculate. If he did attend one of the London grammar schools—most likely—we know that composition and language training was preeminent; that grammar, rhetoric and logic exercises were characteristic of Saint Paul's, London, after which numerous grammar schools were patterned. A brief review of the course of study at St. Paul's, for example the tertia class, reveals the following:[4]

Monday	Morning	A part in the Grammar
	Afternoon	A lesson in Ovid de Tristibus
Tuesday	Morning	A part in the Grammar
	Afternoon	A lesson in Erasmus Colloquia
	Exercise	
Wednesday	Morning	A part in the Grammar
	Afternoon	A lesson in Nomenclatura
	Exercise	Some verses out of the Proverbs or Psalmes or English Dictamen
Thursday	Morning	A part in the Grammar
	Afternoon	A lesson in Ovid de Tristibus
	Exercise	Some verses out of the Proverbs or Psalmes
Fryday		A Repetition of what hath been Learned the whole weeke
Saturday		Some verses out of the Proverbs or Psalmes

Thus Wednesday included attention to letter writing while by implication additional time was also devoted to exercises, repetitions, similar to the ancient lessons known as *Progymnasmata* or composition exercises. This latter concept Day carried forward in his own work.

Day must also have been familiar with models for imitation, properly called formularies. His own education demanded that not only should he consciously imitate models, but create his own work with formularies as a guide. English and Latin formularies were prolific during his grammar school years and later. A few examples will suffice:

Richard Taverner,	*The garden of Wysdom* (1539)
Richard Rainolde,	*The Foundacions of Rhetorike* (1563)
William Fulwood,	*The Enimie of Idlenesse* (1568)
Abraham Flemming,	*A Panoplie of Epistles, Or, a looking Glasse for the vnlearned* (1576)

Erasmus gave impetus to many works on letter writing, beginning with his *De conscribendis epistolis* (1521) to be followed by works as Christopher Hegendorphinus' *Methodus conscribendi epistolas* (1537); Conrad Celtes' *Methodus conficiendarum epistoharum* (1537); Georgius Macropedius' *Methodus de conscribendis epistolis* (1580); Vives' *De conscribendis epistolis* (1537); Brandolini's *De ratione scribendi* (1549); Verepaeus' *De epistolis latine conscribendis* (1592). Later we shall suggest which of these works Day depended upon.

One may conclude that Day was exposed to rhetorical theory, was familiar with the rules of grammar, and knew that letter writing was founded on the ancient theories of rhetorical composition. He would support that tradition in his *English Secretary*.

Day wrote and translated several other works, seemingly unrelated to communication theory and practice. He translated the Greek romance *Daphnis and Chloe* (1587)[5] from a French version by Jacques Amyot who translated from the Greek. Beyond this and the *Secretary*, Day is said to have published a pamphlet entitled "Wonderfull Straunge Sightes seene in the Element ouer the citie of London" and an elegy on Sir Philip Sidney. You may judge his sonnet writing ability as a commendatory to an English translation of an Italian work by John Baptista Nenna:

> My artless Muse (if any muse at all),
> Couched in rude, in base, in home attire,
> Not fitting thoughts or actions that aspire. . . .
> But sithe thy zeale to Honour Nenion
> Whom thy desires haue broughte from forreine soile,
> Hath beene one cause of this thy taken toile,
> Vnwaited on with praise thou mayst not goe.
> For lookers on that doe partake thy pleasure,
> Must of thy vertue find the pretious treasure.[6]

In brief, Day's contribution to the history of communication through letter writing rests on his one significant work: his *Secretary*. It is to the etymology of the term secretary that we shall now turn.

Secretary

Consistency in orthography and meaning of the term secretary severely wobbles during the Renaissance, and earlier. Day, for example, vacillates between "secretary," "secretarie," "scretory," or "secretorie," occasionally

using different spellings on the same page. Such aberrations were common as the 16th century sought to codify English spellings as both the language of nobility and the common man moved into the Vernacular from Latin.

Day must have received criticism—and well he might—of the 1586 edition. Indeed, he publicly chastised the printer of the book for errors brought on by undue haste and pressures, Day promising that things will be better, subsequently. Little is better in 1599 with Day still upbraiding his printer for errors, but more mildly:

> And yet after this continued trauell vnto this present, you either in mine or in the printers escapes find any thing blame worthy, couer it I pray you as before you haue done with the vaile of your courtesie. The copies before this, haue bene I confessee erroniously many waves deliuered, and this by the blottings and interlinings had in the former amendements hath peraduenture also his escapes or mistakings: If any be, they are fewe I hope, and therefore the more easie to be tollerated. Onely correct where fault is, and the printer and I shalbe beholden vnto you.[7]

The inference is that previous editions were disorganized—they were—and consistency in orthography and content were lacking.

Day is conservative. The OED[8] lists three other spellings of "secretary" in addition to Day's variants; Day avoids them. While orthographic changes of "secretary" number eight, variants in the meaning of the term are diverse. At least 16 variations are recorded in the OED, four of which find expression in Day's concept of a secretary's responsibilities:

Letter Writing. Day recognizes that great skill is needed in a secretary who must write for another. In fact he suggests this writing function as major.

> . . . what great perfection is to be required in such a one, by whose title the same is deliuered, neither supposing the matter herein contained to appeare so sufficient, as perfectly thereby to enable what in the same function is to bee required, but because the orderly writing of Letters, being a principall part belonging to a Secretorie is by the Method.[9]

By this, he does not mean penmanship or, as he says, "ordering of the pen" as seemed to be the main understanding of others. Having said that, he does not wish to go too far afield because later in the book he suggests that "albeit the vse heereof is not the least part of manie other things incident to the same office."[10] Thus letter writing is a viable function.

Secrecy. Day argues by analogy, suggesting that each house has a place for private matters to be stored and discussed. So too the person who has access to that environment has certain responsibilities. Day, in his usual prolix manner, puts his discussion this way:

> The Closet in euerie house, as it is a reposement of secrets, so is it onlie (as I saide before) at the owners, and no others commaundement: The Secretorie, as hee is a keeper and conseruer of secrets, so is hee by his Lorde or Maister, and by none other to bee directed. To a Closet, there belongeth properlie, a doore, a locke, and a key: to a Secretorie, there appertaineth incidentlie, Honestie, Care, and Fidelitie.[11]

And further

> . . . that he ought therein to be as a thicke plated doore, where thought, without extraordinarie violence no man may enter, but by the locke which is the tongue, and that to be of such efficacie, as whereof no counterfeit key shoulde bee able to make a breach, without the selfe same instrument that by the director thereof is alwayes to be caried.[12]

Accounts. The OED suggests that secretarial responsibilities went beyond simple correspondence, including the keeping of records, transacting various other forms of business, and presumably handling financial matters. Thus secrecy and trust paralleled confidence in handling letters. Day supports the above concept, adding that fidelity in character should be present in a secretary.

Style of Writing. Legal documents between the 15th and 17th century, and others, were characterized as being written in a secretarial style. Thus any kind of imitation of black letter type must have been clear in order of wording and penmanship. Day chose such perfection, suggesting that " . . . it is requisite the Secretory, be for the perfection of his hand, in the varietie and neat deliuerie of his letters in writing, singularlie to be commended, that he haue with himselfe also therein a verie readie vse, quicke, and speedie conueyance for dispatch . . ."[13]

Thus Day is in step with both orthographic and semantic variations of the term secretary, but also receives a classification in the OED attributable only to him: the first book in English to have "secretary" in the title.[14]

The English Secretary

Two English texts preceded Day as works on formulary letter writing. The first was William Fulwood's *The Enimie of Idlenesse* (1568),[15] written for the "right worshypful the Maister, Wardens, and Company of the Marchant Tayllors of London." While one could argue that the text represented the earliest English work for business writing, it is really not an original work but a translation of the French *Le stile et maniere de composer, dicter, et escrire toute sorte d'epistres, ou lettres missiues, tant par response, que autrement, auec epitome de la poinctuation françoise.*[16]

The title page of Fulwood's work suggests the book's unoriginal character: The Enimie of Idlenesse: Teaching the maner and stile how to endite . . . Set forth in English by William Fulwood Marchant.[17] Four books made up the work:

> Book I Involves principles of letter writing under the heading of instructions on how to "endyte" or fashion letters, divided in to Letters of Doctrine, of Myrth, or of Grauitie.

Book II	Twenty-three letters comprise translations of politicians and other celebrities of the period under the heading of "companies of Sundry learned mens Letters and Epistles."
Book III	Specimen letters comprise this section and include letters between father and son, wife and husband, a sister to her brother, and letters to daughters, mother, business associates, and others, under the heading of "howe to write by aunswere."
Book IV	Only 28 pages are devoted to this section on love letters or as Fulwood says "containyng sundry Letters, belonging to Loue, as well in Verse as in Prose.

There is little originality in a second English work on letter writing preceding Day: Abraham Flemming's *A Panoplie of Epistles, Or, a looking Glasse for the Vnlearned* (1576).[18] His unblemished claim to not being original is refreshing inasmuch as he got ideas "vsed of the best and the eloquentest Rhetoricians that have liued in all ages, and haue beene famous in that facultie.[19]

Thus all letters are translations from 57 authors, a "who's who" of known persons such as Vives, Erasmus, Macropedius, Hegendorphinus, Ascham, Cicero, Isocrates, Socrates, Brutus, Darius, Cyrus, Alexander, Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno. Originality was sparse, the work acting as a bridge between the world of Latin and the tenative steps of English as the basis for classroom exercises.

Angell Day in many respects was more original, more creative than the two preceding English translators. He eschews dependence, firmly stating that in English he has set a pathway "as the like wherof hath not at any time heretofore beene deliuered. Nowe first deuized, and newly published."[20]

The earliest or 1586 edition of the *Secretary* states a specific admiration for Latin predecessors as Cicero, Lucian, and Politian. Furthermore,

> others are plentifully extant, some also of the choysest and beste learned of late yeares, haue endeuoured by writing to publishe in the Latine tongue, their sundry methodes touching the same, among whom Erasmus, euermore famous for his studies, and Macropedius at large. Lodouicus Viues and Hegindorphimus, learnedlye, yet brieflye each of them well approving the goodnes, in that by seuerall rules they haue distinguished the diuersities, ground and skilful directions thereof.[21]

By 1599 the above names are absent, the author makes no bow toward any source.

Rhetorical Position of Day's *Secretary*

There is danger in trying to position any work on communication into a pattern. Only by hindsight can we see that Day's philosophy of communication, as expressed in letter writing, fell into what Howell calls the Neo-Ciceronian period, or a reemphasis upon the tenets of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Since Day fits into the genre of the

written, one can immediately divorce him from the canons of memory and delivery. That leaves invention, arrangement, and style.

Invention or *inventio* had a meaning different in the Renaissance, and earlier, than today. Briefly, it meant searching out the topics which could serve as material for use within discourse. Aristotle suggested 28 such locations or *loci*,[22] while Cicero[23] devoted portions of his *Topica* and the *De inventione* to invention. These were the ancients and progenitors of the period in which Day wrote. Hence any writer or communicator could not help but be influenced by this oral rhetorical tradition, including Day who reflected that influence and applied those precepts to the art of letter writing.

Arrangement, or *dispositio*, is more clearly seen in Day than invention. It is so because Day simply adapts the parts of an oration to his letters, thereby firmly placing him in the school of Neo-Ciceronians who adhered to classical rhetoric. Let me offer a confirming quotation:

> In such kind therefore of Epistles, rightly and with good skil to be handled, the learner shal vnderstand, that there are three things, by meanes whereof, for the needfull expressing and orderlie deliuerie of anie matter whatsoeuer, he must of necessitie be furnished. Inuention first, wherein plentifullie is searched and considered, what kind of matter, how much varietie of sentences, what sorts of figures, how many similitudes, what approbations, diminutions, insinuations and circumstances are presentlie needefull, or furthering to the matter in handling. Then, Disposition, whereby is orderlie, cunninglie, and perfectlie laide downe and disposed, euerie matter and cause in his one order, proportion and place. Thirdlie, Eloqution, whose efficacie in speaches, neate, pure and elegant, is in the other Chapter vnder aptnes of words sufficientlie alreadie described.[24]

The preceding theme of Day is further amplified when he proposes that the parts of a letter are five—identical to the five parts of an oration.[25]

Exordium	A beginning or induction to the matter to be written of, which is not alwayes after one sort or fashion, but in diuerse maners . . .
Narratio or Propositio	Then Narratio, or Propositio, each seruing to one effect, wherein is declared or proponed, in the one by plaine tearmes, in the other by inference, or comparison, the verie substance of the matter whatsoeuer to be handled.
Conformatio	Then confirmatio, wherein are amplified or suggested many reasons, for the aggrauating or proof of any matter in question.
Confutatio	After confutatio, whereby is diminished, disproued or auoided, whatsoeuer to bee supposed, obiected or aggrauated.
Peroratio	Lastlie, Peroratio, in which after a briefe recapitulation of that which hath beene vrged, the occasions thereof are immediatelie concluded.

By way of comparison, Quintilian, as a representative of the ancients, speaks about the *exordium* as an introduction to the subject on which the orator will speak; statement of facts or *narratio* suggests the nature of the subject on which the speaker will have to give judgment; verification or

confirmatio implies proving the thesis as stated in the *narratio*, and peroration which some call the completion and others the conclusion.[26] Day's circuitous style summarized the ancient canons of communication in this manner:

> These are not altogither at all times vsed, but some or the most of them as occasion serueth, either admitted or reiected: besides which, others also are sometimes remembred. The vse whereof as in sundrie Epistles they may be deemed necessarie, shall in their seuerall examples hereafter perused, appeare more euidentlie and largely.[27]

In addition, Day classifies his types of letters and headings similar to the types of ancient oratory, namely demonstrative, deliberative, and judicial, to which he adds, independently, a fourth category, the familiar.

Another comparison with the ancient rhetoricians is needed: Day's classification of the three major kinds of communicative styles. His own words serve as an introduction:

> Now in as much as Eloquution is annexed vnto the stile, which euermore is also tied to the argument and substance of euerie Epistle: it is to be regarded what stile maie generallie bee demmed meetest for the common habit, wherein each of them maie ordinarlie be published. In the recording whereof, we do find three sorts, especiallie in all kinds of writing and speaking, to haue bene generallie commended.[28]

He then goes on to record the three traditional oratorical styles of the Plain, the Middle, and the Grand, paralleling tenets first noted in the *ad Herennium*,[29] the *de Orator*[30] and Quintilian.[31] By analogy he proposes that the sublime style of writing is used with kings, princes, and other noble persons, along with themes which use figures of rhetoric.

The humble style is appropriate to the familiar letters, deals with simple subjects, indeed "sweepeth euen the very ground itselfe," while the mediocre—Day's word—is appropriate to letters as declamations, commentaries and to letters in general.

One final characteristic places Day in the stylistic or *elocutio* school of writers, the appearance in later editions of a section entitled "A Declaration of such Tropes, Figures and Schemes, as either vsually or for ornament sake are therein required." Style as Aristotle conceived it, emphasized clearness, correctness, appropriateness, and ornateness. Only later were there proliferations or ornament into indescribably complex configurations of language, helped by such writers as the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero's *de Orator*, Quintilian, Wilson, Talaeus, Fenner, Fraunce, Butler, Hoskins, Erasmus, Susenbrotus, Sherry, Peacham, Puttenham, and Day.[32]

Day's subdivisions and methods of handling the figures we shall note in our next section. Here we conclude that Day was profoundly influenced by the

principles of oratory. His originality was greater than the two preceding English writers on the art of letter writing, yet in step with the rhetorical traditions of his day. Direct dependence on the ancients is difficult to prove because Latin formularies on letter writing preceded him, some of which he may have used in school. His work therefore fits into two Renaissance schools of thought: formulary because he suggests letters for imitation, and stylistic because he gives inordinate emphasis to the schemes and tropes, even as sidenotes, and an elaborate section to themselves.

Structure of Day's *Secretary*

My discussion of the *English Secretary* is based on the 1599 edition because the first, 1586, contained only one part while the later editions included three: letters, schemes and tropes, and the qualities of a secretary. But first I wish to view the idea movement of the section on letters.

Schoolboys, uneducated persons, secretaries to people of significance would have liked Day's organization. Theory precedes practice; discussion precedes example; headnotes precede sidenotes. When compared with his contemporaries, Day's purpose statements and organization is clear, usually complete with a *divisio*, possibly thereby suggesting why his work was so popular and went through numerous editions and printings.

Theory for Day was a restatement of his predecessors. He is not ashamed to suggest that many excellent authors have already written on the subject, yet he will make his own contribution. Three principles should characterize a letter: firstly, aptness of words and sentences, brevity of speech, and comeliness in delivery. And although these qualities are not fully defined or developed, they serve as the basis for further discussion.

Secondly, he views the parts of a letter as wholly rhetorical, Day betraying his Classical dependence with headnotes as "Oratory parts in epistle" and "Rhetoricall parts in Epistle."

While discussing background and before noting any full-blown examples, he, thirdly, minutely examines the salutation, the farewell, the subscription, and the outward direction or estate level of persons receiving letters. Examples predominate; a kaleidoscope of directions, so minute that the reader of today would walk away from the exactitude demanded. For example, Day's suggestions for addressing an Archbishop and Chancellor read this way:

> To the most reuerend Father in God, the L. Archbishop of Canturburie, or York, Primate of England, and Metropolitane his verie good grace. To the right reuerende Father in God, and my verie good Lorde, the L. Bishop of London. To the high and mightie Prince, L. Duke of B. his most noble grace. To the right honourable and my especiall good L. the Lorde Chauncellor, or Lord high Treasurer of England.[33]

Fourthly, Day is elaborate in categorizing letters, quite consistently offering (1) a theoretical discussion followed with (2) examples that illustrate his theory. Today's scholars would find his 32 types of letters too discursive, too meandering, too tedious. The following taxonomy of Day's Letters provides an overview of material on which students, writers, businesspeople of the day based their correspondence.

Demonstrative letters

1. Descriptorie—a description of the goodness or value of a thing (3 e.g.)
2. Laudatorie—praise of a person, deed, or thing (1 e.g.)
3. Vituperatorie—dispraise of a person, deed, or thing (1 e.g.)

Deliberative letters

1. Horatorie—advising and counseling (3 e.g.)
2. Dehoratorie—dissuading (1 e.g.)
3. Swasorie—similar to above (2 e.g.)
4. Disswasorie—similar, with emphasis on the negative (2 e.g.)
5. Responsorie—really familiar letter but discussed in deliberative section; depends heavily upon arguments presented in original (8 e.g.)
6. Conciliatorie—desire to receive acquaintance, friendship, of person of higher stature (2 e.g.)
7. Reconciliatorie—seeks reconciliation (2 e.g.)
8. Petitorie—petitions to someone (2 e.g.)
9. Commendatorie—similar to the above, courteous recommendation (6 e.g.)
10. Consolatorie—notes to those who are grieved (4 e.g.)
11. Monitorie—warnings to the unexperienced (3 e.g.)
12. Reprehensorie—explaining faults of person (2 e.g.)
13. Amatorie—letters of love (2 e.g.)

Judicial letters

1. Accusatorie—accusation (2 e.g.)
2. Excusatorie—excuses for action (1 e.g.)
3. Defensorie—defense of actions (1 e.g.
4. Expostulatorie—reasoning, debating, or arguing for a cause (5 e.g.)
5. Exprobatorie—vehement distain (2 e.g.)
6. Invective—sharp and bitter statement against a person (4 e.g.)
7. Purgatorie—no definition supplied (1 e.g.)
8. Comminatorie—to threaten (2 e.g.)
9. Deprecatorie—entreaty, requests of favor (3 e.g.)
10. Defensorie—defense of position (1 e.g.)

Familiar letters

1. Narratorie—general correspondence, discussion of affairs (3 e.g.)

2. Nunciatorie—similar to the above (2 e.g.)
3. Remuneratorie—gratitude for something received (4 e.g.)
4. Gratulatorie—rejoicing over good fortune of another (3 e.g.)
5. Obiurgatorie—rebuking actions of someone (1 e.g.)
6. Mandotorie—most ordinary of all letters (4 e.g.)

From the above, the reader can grasp Day's methodology: (1) a brief discussion of the type of letter; (2) an occasional transitional paragraph leading to the next type of letter; (3) a headnote to the exemplary letter; and (4) sidenotes which suggest either the figures of speech or the rhetorical divisions of the letter. One example will suffice. Genre of letter: deliberative; name of letter: commendatorie; headnote: "An example commendatorie, wherein is recommended to a noble man from his inferiour, the conditions and behauiours of a person;"[34] sidenotes: Narratio, Commendation of the party, Petition. Peroration. The sample letter then follows.

The letters for the most part are pragmatic, superior to the theory section which simply carries rhetoric over to letter writing. A usable business letter, for instance, is one entitled *An example of an Epistle Accusatorie in the state of Coniectural, from a merchant to the father of his seruant*, with another example of a return letter by the father to the merchant.

But a pragmatic value of Day's letters lie in his final section entitled Epistles familiar. Here, one could suppose, titles as a son to his father; from one friend to another; servant or factor to his master; from an inferior to one far his better; from a wife to her husband; from a master to his servant; from a man to his wife, would receive thorough reading.

Day gives up on love letters, his last exemplary section. Copies I have read show no more wear than other sections of the work, for Day must have found the task uncomfortable.

> And nowe the last of all these diuisions yet vnspoken of is Amatorie, whereof because the humours of all sortes with loue possessed, are so infinite and so great an vncertaintie in them remaineth, as that perchance euen in the verie writing of his letter, the louer himself is scarce certain of his own intended purpose therein, the lesse must of necessitie be the precepts of the same, for that in some of them wee require and entreate in others expostulate the matters and occasions falling in the necke thereof . . .[35]

Finally, he confesses that he has had little experience in study of love letters:

> And howbeit the little experience I haue had of some conuersing in this kind of studie, hath sufficientlie taught mee to knowe, that the verie instinct or setled impression of this kinde of fantasie is such a Schoolemaister to inuention, and so cunning a refiner of any well disposed conceit, as that with very small help, it thereby commonlie performeth much more than well could bee otherwise intended.[36]

Figures of Speech in Day's Letters

Day is a figurist,[37] so called because editions after 1567 include a separate section entitled *A Declaration of Al such Tropes, Figures or Schemes, as for excellencie and ornament in writing, are speciallie vsed in this methode.*[38] The motivation for including this section is clear when he remarks to the reader:

> I haue now for better supplement of the learners knowledge, determined in this place to make a collection of them (the figures) all, remembering with my selfe, that vnto such as are vnexperienced in their particular applications, they shall be but of verie slender moment in their quotations, without also they may be instructed by example, how, where, and in what tearmes, wordes or cariage, they are vsed . . .[39]

The 93 figures of speech in the *Secretary* need not detain us long. Divisions and subdivisions are at the discretion of Day but parallel the traditional Greek and Latin dichotomy of schemes and tropes employed since antiquity. Thus tropes (variations of words or sentences) are divided into tropes of words (7) and tropes of sentences (9). Schemes (different ways of writing) he divides into schemes syntactical (21)—omitting orthographical—and schemes rhetorical of words (12), of thought (44).

Therefore for Day the figures are adjuncts to letters, stylistic devices that gave elegance to thought. One could hypothesize further that as more people left Latin for the vernacular, the common man had to incorporate the flowers of rhetoric into his communication when writing to persons of privilege: the merchant, politician, churchman, nobleman, master. Ordinary writing, plain writing would remind the common man of his lower class. Would it not be to the writer's benefit to secure an aristocrat's approval by using similar devices that would sound agreeable? The many letters of Day seem to suggest just that.[40]

Character of a Secretary

Finally, 32 pages of the "Partes, place and office of a Secretorie" conclude Day's work. Modern readers will recognize little that is familiar. It too deserves little attention except as an historical statement.

Day feels he is original in English. "Considering howe many woorthie and excellent men, not onely in our present age, but in manie years before vs haue liued, none of all which (though questionlesse furnished with verie great abilitie) haue to my certaine knowledge, euer written ought in our English tongue, touching this title.[41] Furthermore, he is completing a promise made in his first edition where he said a section on the secretary would be later included, basing his comments not only on observation, but actual service himself as a secretary. Thus his reasons for writing.

Absent in his discussion is what a secretary does. Rather it includes who he is, namely, the human qualities that a male secretary should possess. Briefly, men—women are never mentioned—should possess qualities not unlike the gods themselves: fidelity, humility, faithfulness, diligence, carefulness, industriousness, wittiness, studiousness, zealousness, discretion, energy, honesty, care, nonslothfulness, not given to drunkenness, and a host of other qualities too tedious to record. The man, not the responsibilities, occupy Day.

It would be a mistake not to remark that Day is therefore a traditionalist communicator for his time, employing traditional concepts of rhetoric to his purposes of letter writing. Yet his originality is in implementing ancient communication theory, with examples, formularies, exercises which students, merchants, even the uneducated could use in their letter writing. That he was popular there is no doubt; his *Secretary* had numerous editions and printings between 1586 and 1625. He may never have thought of the term *business communication*, but in some way he made an early contribution to it.

Notes and References

1. Luella M. Wolff, "A Brief History of the Art of Dictamen: Medieval Origins of Business Letter Writing," *The Journal of Business Communication* 16, No. 2 (Winter 1979), 3-11.

2. Angell Day, *The English Secretarie* (London 1586). The complete title page of the British Museum copy reads: The English Secretorie. Wherein is contayned, a Perfect Method, for the inditing of all manner of Epistles and familiar Letters, together with their diuersities enlarged by examples under their seuerall Tytles. In which is layd forth a Path-waye, so apt, plaine and easie, to any learners capacity, as the like whereof hath not at any time heretofore beene deliuered. Nowe first deuized, and newly published, by Angel Daye. *Altior fortuna Virtus*. At London, Printed by Robert Walde-graue, and are to be solde by Richard Iones, dwelling at the Signe of the Rose and the Crowne, neere Vnto Holburn Bridge, 1586. Other editions I have viewed are those of 1585, 1587, 1599, 1607, 1614, 1621, 1625.

3. Edward Arber, ed., *Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London* (London 1875), reprinted by Peter Smith (1950) Vol. I, p. 98b. The DNB includes the above information, but adds the critical comment that the *Secretary* is "... a curious and entertaining manual of epistolary correspondences." See Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, DNB (London 1978) Vol. V, p. 680.

4. Donald Lemen Clark, *John Milton at St. Paul's School* (New York, 1948), p. 111.

5. The verbosity of Day parallels his contemporaries on the title page of the British Museum copy:

> Daphnis and Chloe Excellently describing the weight of affection, the simplicitie of loue, the purport of honest meaning, the resolution of men, and disposition of Fate, finished in a Pastorall, and interlaced with the praises of a most peerlesse Princesse, wonderfull in Maiestie, and rare in perfection, celebrated within the same Pastorall, and therefore termed by the name of The Shepheards Holidaie. By Angell Daye. *Altior fortune virtus*. At London printed by Robert Waldegraue & are to be sold at his shop in Paules church-yard at the signe of the Crane 1587.

6. The complete title of British Museum copy: Nennio or a Treatise of Nobility: Wherein is discoursed what true Nobilitie is, with such qualities as are required in a perfect Gentleman. Written in Italian by that famous Doctor and worthy knight Sir John Baptista Nenna of Bari. Done into English by William Iones Gent. Printed by P. S. for Paule Linley, and Iohn Flasket, and are to be sold at their shop in Paules churchyard, at the Signe of the black Beare, 1595.

7. Day, 1599. Sig. A3^{v}. Our dependence upon the 1599 edition is due to its accessibility and its inclusion of all three books originally planned by Day in the 1587 edition. See especially Angell Day, *The English Secretary*, reprinted by Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints (Gainesville 1967).

8. *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) (Oxford 1933), rpt. 1970, Vol. 9, pp. 358-59.

9. Day, 1599, Sig. A4^{r}.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

14. *OED*, p. 359.

15. William Fulwood, The Enimie of Idleness: Teaching the maner and stile how to endite, compose and write all sorts of Epistles and Letters: as well by answer, as otherwise. Deuided into foure Bokes, no lesse pleasaunt than profitable. Set forth in English by William Fulwood Marchant, & c. The Contentes hereof appere in the Table at the latter ende of the Booke. An Enimie to Idleness, A frend to Exercise: By practise of the prudent pen, Loe here before thine eyes. Imprinted at London by Henry Bynneman, for Leonard Maylard Anno 1568.

16. See especially Katherine Gee Hornbeak, "The Complete Letter-Writer in English 1568-1800," *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 15, Nos. 3-4 (April-July 1934), p. 3; also Jean Robertson, *The Art of Letter Writing* (London, 1942), pp. 13-14.

17. Fulwood, 1568. Title page.

18. Abraham Flemming, A Panoplie of Epistles, Or a looking Glasse for the vnlearned. Conteyning a perfecte platforme of inditing letters of all sorts, to persons of al estates and degrees, as well our superiours, as also our equall and inferiours: vsed of the best and the eloquentest Rhetoricians that haue liued in all ages, and haue beene famous in that facultie. Gathered and translated out of the Latine into English, by Abraham Flemming. *Armat spina roses, melle tegunt apes.* Imprinted at London, for Ralph Newberie, dwelling in Fletestrete a litle aboue the great Conduite. *Annoia Vingineo partu* 1576.

19. *Ibid.*, Title page.

20. Day, 1586. Title page.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

22. Lane Cooper, trans., *The Rhetoric of Aristotle* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932) 2.23.

23. Cicero, *Topica*, *De inventione*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1949)

24. Day, 1599, p. 9.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

26. See following appropriate sections in Quintilian, *Institutes*, trans. H. E. Butler (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1953), 4.1.1-79; 4.2.1-132; 3.9.1-5; 6.1.1ff.

27. Day, 1599, p. 11.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

29. Harry Caplan, trans., *Ad C. Herennium* (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1954), 4.8.11.

30. Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. H. Rackham (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1958), 3.177, 199, 212.

31. Quintilian, 1953, 10.1.44; 12.10.63ff.

32. The following list is brief, but gives the reader additional works—contemporary with Day—which devoted space to a discussion of the figures: Erasmus, *De dvplici copia verborvm ac rervm* (London, 1511); Susenbrotus, *Epitome troporvm ac schematvm et grammaticorum & rhetorum* (1540); Richard Sherry, *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes* (London, 1550); Mosellanus, *Tabvlae de schmetibvs et tropis in rhetorica* (London, 1573); Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (London, 1577); Abraham Fraunce, *The Arcadian Rhetorike* (London, 1588); John Hoskins, *Directions for Speech and Style* (London, 1599), ed. Hoyt H. Hudson (Princeton, 1935).

33. Day, 1599, p. 18.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

37. Sister Miriam Joseph Rauh, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (New York, 1947), p. 14.

38. Day, 1599, p. 75.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

40. Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500-1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956). See his comments on a similar point regarding oral style, pp. 117-18.

41. Day, 1599, p. 101.

The Earliest Correspondence of the British East India Company (1600-19)

Kitty O. Locker
Ohio State University

Conscious in its own time of being "the Grandest Society of Merchants in the Universe," the British East India Company began in 1600 as simply yet another trading company designed to make a profit for its investors. Over the next 200 years, as it subjugated the Indian subcontinent in pursuit of that trade, the Company gradually became devoted more to administrative matters. It was dissolved by Parliament in 1858, not because it could no longer make a profit (Parliament had in fact abolished the Company's trading function 25 years earlier), but because the British government believed that it could rule India more efficiently, and certainly more easily, without the Company as an often recalcitrant intermediary.

The Company's records and correspondence were voluminous, and even though over 323 tons were sold as wastepaper in 1858-60 in an effort to save space,[1] and other documents were lost, an enormous amount still remains. Students of political and economic history have long appreciated the value of these materials as primary sources for their own research, but no one has yet looked at the correspondence as correspondence. The British East India Company was one of the most important and one of the longest-lived of the precursors to both the modern corporation and the modern government bureaucracy, and a study of its correspondence will make a major contribution to our understanding of the history of business and administrative communication.

In this article, I shall discuss only the Company's earliest correspondence (1600-19). The decision to stop at 1619 is an arbitrary one, based primarily on the fact that most of the surviving documents before 1619 have been printed *verbatim*.[2]

The correspondence from 1600-19 is sharply individualistic. The language of some writers is vigorous and direct; the style of others is so affected that one is reminded of Lyly's *Euphues*, which first appeared in 1578 and remained in print throughout this period. The writers frequently make no attempt to

disguise their feelings (even in situations where tact would seem called for); the letters from 1600-19 have none of the faceless impersonality that frequently marks the modern—and even the eighteenth-century—bureaucrat. In fact, although the letters share some stylistic features, individual correspondents differ so much that one can sometimes assert with confidence which of the four men who signed a letter probably wrote it.

Many of the letters and journal entries, it is true, are dull, containing bald accounts of the price of pepper that day, what colors of cloth are in demand, or sailing conditions. But the correspondence also yields fascinating vignettes:

- The Company's request that its factors, or agents, "do [their] best to bring for the Lord of Salisbury [Robert Cecil, then Secretary of State] some parrots, monkeys, marmosets or other stray beasts and fowls that [they] esteem rare and delightful"[3]
- Its injunction, seeming to grow more plaintive each time it is repeated, that cloves be loaded without "overwetting"[4]
- The report that an English mastiff, sent as a present to the Great Mogul (whose Kingdom encompassed North Central India) has killed a leopard, attacked a boar, and thus "disgraced the Persian dogs, wherewith the King was exceedingly pleased"[5]
- One factor's matter-of-fact statement that he "brought a wench yesterday cost me 3 taels [a tael was worth 5 shillings], for which she must serve five years and then repay back the three taels, or some friend for her, or else remain a perpetual captive. She is but 12 years old, over small yet for trade. . . ."[6]
- The letter of a sea captain, tired, ill, beset with a sick crew and a leaking ship, so pessimistic that the close, "Your Worships' in all dutiful offices while I live," seems not mere formula but a heartfelt intimation of mortality.[7]

The correspondence of the East India Company seems to be reasonably typical of the business correspondence of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[8] The variety in style, tone, and, to a certain extent, patterns of organization suggests that the correspondence often depended more on the resources, imagination, and personality of the individual writer than it did on any received or reasoned theory of rhetoric or business communication. (We can, however, see the influence of the training these men received in some features of the letters, particularly in sentence structure and in formulaic phases.) The content of the letters shows that the subject matter considered appropriate for business correspondence was more fixed than the style: letters were primarily a means of conveying information, influencing the reader, or eliciting action. Some of the letters written between factors in India, however, contain sections which seem designed simply to entertain or to serve as human contact between Englishmen who must have felt very cut off from their native land and society.

The East India Company's Fortunes, 1600-19

The British East India Company did not have an easy time establishing itself. In 1600, when it received its charter, trade was bad and capital was scarce.[9] Its ships sailed out to the East Indies to find that the Dutch East India Company held a virtual monopoly in the lucrative Spice Islands, which it was understandably unwilling to share. In 1608, when the British Company turned its attention to India, it found that the Portuguese had already established trading posts, or "factories," there and "did all they could to interfere"[10]—an interference which included capturing one of the Company's ships and taking its men prisoners in 1609 and opening fire on English ships on several other occasions over the next several years. In the meantime, the commander of another voyage and those who went ashore with him at Mocha in Arabia were captured by the natives and held hostage for six months before they escaped. Finally, the financial plan under which the early voyages were made encouraged the factors left in the Indies to bid against each other, "each seeking to sell first, although it be to the great hindrance of the general stock."[11]

In spite of these difficulties, the Company was successful financially. From 1600-20, the Company launched twelve "separate" voyages (so called because accounts for each were kept separately, with the rate of return for any one voyage based solely on that voyage and the profits going only to those who had invested in that particular voyage), one independent voyage, and two series of joint-stock voyages. Of the separate voyages, only the fourth lost money; the others returned profits of 95-234 percent. The joint-stock voyages were less successful, yielding only 87 and 12 percent respectively.[12] While these profits were not guaranteed and in any case could not compare with the spectacular profit of 4,600 percent returned to the backers of Drake's privateering expedition of 1577-80,[13] the profits on the separate voyages did compare favorably with the returns of similar companies[14] and were much higher than the 10 percent which was the legal limit for money lent at interest within England.[15] From 1604-18 the Company seems to have had no difficulty in securing the capital it needed.

Kinds of Documents Produced by the East India Company

In addition to keeping detailed records of its financial accounts,[16] the East India Company produced a variety of external and internal documents, many of which still survive. The following discussion omits documents that are merely lists, bookkeeping records, or abstracts of other documents.

External Correspondence

In its earliest years, the Company corresponded with three external groups: the English Crown, or representatives thereof; foreign princes in whose dominions the Company hoped to trade; and foreign governments and companies with whom it was competing or fighting in the East Indies.

In its correspondence with the Crown, the Company was reasonably successful. It was unable to shake James' determination in 1603 to sell his own pepper first, before members of the Company could sell theirs—a serious delay, for the plague had so decimated London that the market was much reduced. However, it did receive a monopoly to import pepper in 1609, an exemption from the statute regarding garbling, i.e., sifting or cleansing, for its spices to be unloaded in England but reloaded for sale elsewhere, and, in a series of Letters Patent 1606-18, the right to export bullion and foreign coin.[17]

The first letters to foreign princes issued by Queen Elizabeth were identical, with a blank space to be filled in once the name of the monarch was known. By James' reign, the Company had had some experience with some of the princes, and submitted a list of special references to be included in the various letters. In spite of this effort at individualization, however, the Company's success or failure in obtaining permission to trade seems to have depended less on any letter presented than on the personal force of the Company's representatives and on the prince's attitude toward the Europeans already trading in his dominion.

The correspondence with foreign companies cannot be considered a success. For a time, a merger with the Dutch East India Company seemed the best way of securing a foothold in the Spice Islands, and twenty-five articles governing the proposed division of profits, etc., were signed in 1619.[18] The movement toward union came to an abrupt halt four years later, when the Dutch massacred the English force at Amboyna. The Company withdrew from the Spice Islands, and the monopoly in India which it would eventually win was the result not of its external correspondence but of luck, shrewdness, the unpopularity of the Portuguese in India, and the Company's military victories.

Internal Documents

The internal documents produced by the Company in this period are both more extensive and more interesting than the external ones. The internal documents may be divided into records, including journals, minutes, and remembrances, and correspondence, or letters.

Records

Both the Company's structure and the distance separating its various "servants," or employees, were conducive to the keeping of extremely detailed records.

The work of the Company in London was delegated to a Governor, a Deputy-Governor, and 24 "committees."[19] At this stage in the Company's history, the latter were individuals, not groups; the "committees" would later evolve into "Directors," and by the eighteenth century the Company would use the word "committees" in the modern sense. Being elected to the management of a seventeenth-century company was no sinecure. William Foster tells us that the East India Company's "whole staff at starting consisted of a Secretary, Richard Wright, who was one of Smythe's [the Governor's] own servants, and had other work in hand besides, and a beadle to take round the subscription book and give notice of Court [i.e., general] meetings. Nearly all the real work was done by the 'Committees' themselves . . . ; they collected the funds, purchased goods, ships, and provisions, interviewed factors and seamen, checked the accounts, and wrote all the letters of importance."[20]

By 1615, the volume of work required the committees' daily attendance, and they received a stipend for their work.[21] Whenever the Governor and committees met as a group, or whenever a General Court, or meeting, was called of all the adventurers (as investors were called), detailed minutes were kept, preserving the debate on every subject as well as the decision. We have records, for instance, of the committees' judgments of the various candidates for ship or settlement chaplains (each of whom preached a trial sermon which the committees discussed "with the keenness of connoisseurs"[22]); we can follow the debate on whether to send an Englishwoman to Sumatra to marry its King, as he had requested. (A "gentleman of honourable parentage" offered his daughter, but the Company was dubious, and apparently nothing came of it.)[23]

The Company's servants in the Indies had far fewer general meetings than did the Company in London. However, whenever the factors faced a major decision, they met together and recorded their deliberations, or "consultations," in a record that would be sent to England. Several of these consultations are about someone whom the factors have found unsatisfactory and whom they wish to be rid of; these make fascinating reading.[24]

Journals were another variety of records. The master of each ship was required to turn over four copies of his journal to the Governor of the Company.[25] These journals contain information about the weather, sailing, and compass points; events on board; deaths; and details about the flora, fauna, and natives the English have encountered. (Such details are not common in the letters.) The method of composition used by Thomas Best, commander of the 10th voyage (1612-14), was probably typical. According to Foster, "in all probability Best, upon his return to London, handed his rough journal to a scrivener to prepare a copy for delivery to the East India Company. The original Best doubtless retained afterwards for his own use, and what became of it is not known."[26] Sir Thomas Roe, Ambassador to the

Great Mogul's Court at Agra, also kept a journal for the Company (the Company paid his expenses, even though he was the King's ambassador). Foster speculates that Roe's "original notes . . . were jotted down roughly from day to day." A fair copy would then be made for him, and each year Roe had additional copies made for the Company.[27]

The journals during this period are frank, even indiscreet. The Company was aware that this candour, while appropriate within the Company, might be misunderstood by outsiders. In 1622 the Court *Minutes* report that "one Purchas," who had already written his *Pilgrimage*, now wished to begin a history of voyages (to become his *Pilgrimes*, published in 1625). To prepare this work, the Court was informed, he

> did desire to have a sight of some of the Company's journals that might give him light for the setting down the Company's voyages into th' East Indies; wherein he desires to see but the historical part, and will meddle with nothing else. Particularly he desires to see Sir Thomas Roe's journal. As for the broyles between the English and Dutch, *he will set them down otherwise than they lie in the journals*. The Court gave way to his desire; only they ordered that Mr. Ellam and Mr. Lanman shall take care that nothing be taken out of their journals but that which is proper to a history and not prejudicial to the Company; and they entreated Mr. Deputy [the Deputy-Governor] that he would take pains to peruse the notes before they were carried out of the house [italics in original].[28]

The final, and least numerous, sort of records were known as remembrances. These documents were essentially "memos for the file" summarizing events or ideas. They were usually written for the author himself but were sometimes given to a colleague. It is interesting to note that the English word "remembrances" is used rather than the Latin "memorandum." In style, organization, and content, the remembrances are indistinguishable from the letters.[29]

Correspondence

The Company's internal correspondence in this period falls into four categories. The Company's correspondence from England to the Indies in 1600-19 was principally in the form of commissions, or letters of instruction given to the commander of each voyage before he set out. (The few letters from the Company to its servants repeat or augment the directions in the commissions.) The commanders in turn left letters of instruction with the factors who remained in the Indies to buy and sell goods. The factors sent frequent letters to the Company in England, and exchanged even more frequent letters among themselves.

Since modern businesses normally use memos rather than letters for internal correspondence, it may at first seem strange that the Company's voluminous internal correspondence is in letter format. Part of the reason is undoubtedly that the memo as a separate format had not yet evolved in the

seventeenth century. Another and perhaps more important consideration is that, due to the distances and transmission times involved, the men at any one factory were very much on their own. There was no mail service; letters had to go by a specially-hired messenger, by a travelling merchant, or by ship. Letters from one factory to another took at least a week, even in Persia, and from 1-4 months in India, Arabia, Siam, Japan, and the Spice Islands.[30] Letters from the Indies to England took 7-11 months, depending on when the next ship sailed for England and what it encountered on its homeward voyage.[31]

The letters of instruction for factors remaining in the Indies are of little interest, but we may make several observations about the commissions for the separate voyages. Most of the commissions are extremely detailed, and some run as long as 6000-8000 words (19 to 22 printed pages). The commission for the first voyage is short—only five printed pages—but after the Company gained some experience, it concerned itself with every minute detail of the proposed voyage, specifying the religious observances and health practices to be followed, as well as giving instructions about itinerary, merchandise, business practices, record keeping, how to handle the effects of those who died during the voyage, and the line of succession if the commander should die (some commissions named as many as three successive alternates). Since the commissions frequently repeat *verbatim* paragraphs from earlier documents, it is somewhat surprising to note that the organization changes from document to document. In at least one case the change is an improvement, but in most cases the reason for the rearrangement is not clear. The repetitions make the commissions tedious reading, but there are a few amusing notes: the opening phrase, "whereas we the merchants aforesaid with a great charge and trouble have prepared two ships and a pinnace,"[32] or the explanation given to the second voyage for the prohibition against gambling: on the first voyage the sailors had mortgaged their wages gambling and then, "having wasted their wages by such unthrifty means went about to lay a scandal upon the company, alleging they were oppressed by necessity in the voyage to enter into those excessive usurious contents [contracts] to maintain their lives."[33] Clearly, even in 1604 the Company cared about its public image.

The bulk of the Company's correspondence in 1600-19 consists of letters written by various factors to the Company and to each other. The number of surviving letters suggests that Joseph Salbank was not greatly exaggerating when he wrote to the Company that, except for himself, in "the year past 1615 every Englishman of any mean quality living in the Mogol's dominion did express and manifest his dutiful respect unto your Worships by his letters written unto you to the end to advertise you of the state and occurrences of our affairs in these parts."[34]

Throughout its history, the Company sought to supervise closely the activities of its servants in the Indies, and in this period, its need was particularly acute for information about subjects such as which harbors were safe, the danger and depth of the water at various places, and the kinds, quality and prices of both the goods desired in the Indies and the goods available for sale to the English. Aware of the difficulties of transmitting correspondence, the Company therefore directed, "because our letters do sometimes miscarry, or are by some evil willers intercepted, we wish you to write as often as you may and then divers letters at one time, and send the same by sundry passengers giving them special charge for the safe and speedy delivery thereof."[35] When the letters arrived in England, they were noted and, if the contents warranted, read to the General Court. Servants who had no real news might, however, still write just to remind the Company of their existence, and a few of the letters bear the endorsement, "of no moment for any note," or even the acerbic comment, "of no moment at all."[36]

In addition to the "general" or "large" letters intended for the entire Court, we also find several "private" letters. These are still business, not personal, letters; they contain information which the writer evidently felt required discretion—most often a complaint that the writer has been misunderstood, misjudged, and unjustly maligned in the letters of other factors to the Company. William Scott claims, "During the years of good trade at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the internal affairs of the joint-stock companies were on the whole harmonious. This was especially so in the East India Company."[37] To judge from references to the Court *Minutes*, this statement is true enough of the Company's administration in England, but if Scott read the letters written by the factors to the Company and to each other before making that observation, one can only conclude that the factors of other companies must have been contentious indeed.

The letters of the factors to each other are in many cases quite similar to their letters to the Company, an unsurprising situation given the fact that not only were the same people doing the writing but also that the letters between factors were forwarded to England. Several of the letters, however, are less formal than the correspondence to the Company; they are more likely to report mundane occurrences and juicy gossip which indeed may be repeated in a series of letters travelling from one factor to another.[38]

Some Features of the Correspondence of the East India Company

In the space available here, we can note only a few of the most striking features of the correspondence. A more thorough rhetorical analysis and a comparison of the letters with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theories of rhetoric and letter writing will have to await another opportunity.

Organization and Content

Most of the letters open with a statement that the writer has (or in some cases, has not) received a letter from the reader, and frequently the writer notes the letters he has sent to the reader recently. These references to previous correspondence, redundant today, made sense in an age when "a man may send forty letters and it is a great question if one comes to their hands."[39] There seems to be no effort to highlight important items by placing them first; organization seems not to be based on any plan but simply on the order in which ideas occur to the writer. There is, however, one exception to this generalization: whenever writers discuss their own salaries or ask for raises, they invariably do so either in the last paragraph or in a postscript.

References to God are common in the letters (Biblical allusions and quotations, however, are quite rare). References in the body of the letter usually appear when the writer is discussing the weather, sailing conditions, or deaths, but on at least two occasions God is seen as responsible for profits, too.[40] Some of the references to God, particularly in closing sentences, may be formulaic, but most of the references seem to be sincere rather than conventional, a speculation supported by the fact that while some writers frequently invoke the name of God, others use no religious references at all.

Several of the letters share a feature which seems odd to modern communicators trained to emphasize the positive: the writer apologizes for the tediousness of his letter. Some of these authors may have simply had writer's cramp after drafting a five-page letter, and some of them may have been using the conventional humble posture of a factor to his "master." Most of them, however, were simply following a verbal convention. All the sixteenth-century books on letter-writing assert the importance of brevity, which as Angel Day points out in *The English Secretary* (1586 and frequently reprinted), consists not in "fewness of lines" but in "brevity of matter," allowing "scope sufficient remaining for the necessary demonstration and delivery of any needful occasion."[41] This point established, Day enjoins the writer "to abhor all manner of tediousness." However, in the long series of sample "farewells" Day provides, he includes the following: "Weighing how much you are already busied, and not willing to keep you further occupied, I end my long and tedious discourse, being in nothing excepted from wonted salutations and accustomed kind of greetings."[42] This, an out-of-context example, is obviously mere convention. One of the East India Company writers who follows this convention clearly feels that the ritual apology is unwarranted: "If I have been tedious it is in that my desire to give knowledge thereof to our countrymen that they may the better know how to prevent such treacheries by which some of us were taken, and with much more reason to manage a trade in this place I proceeding therein very rawly for want of instructions."[43]

Style

The Company's correspondence in the early seventeenth century exhibits four distinct styles: *plain*, *full*, *florid*, and *colloquial*.

The plain style, which bears an affinity to the prose of Bacon, Tacitus, and Seneca, is straightforward and unself-conscious, with few allusions and little figurative language. It is not always easy to read, for its sentences are often long and involved, burdened with participial phrases and relative clauses. It comprises the majority of the Company's correspondence. The following paragraph is a typical example of the plain style:

> May it please you my last to you was the 29th May, since which have received yours of the 31st ditto, wherein perceive you have taken notice of the 4 firkins of nails and likewise my bill of exchange. The fanes, the smiths be in hand with them as fast as they can; my account, if the barque could but have stayed but 24 hours, by her you had received them. For the stay of the Robert at her last being here, it was but one day and part of a night, which was by reason of a storm that at present a prow could not go aboard.[44]

Note the incongruous juxtaposition when, near the end of the following sentence describing his escape, another writer is suddenly moved to tell us the time of day:

> Came down to the sea side about 7 or 8 miles to the southwards of the ships, where going by the sea side I found a canoe, but never an oar, but God so provided for me that wading along with her to windward, found two gengathoes and with them an oar with a pole, which pole I put out like a bowsprit, and with my garter made it fast, and thereon hung my shirt, and with the oar, though with much ado, and great pain, steered her, but could not guide her so as I would, but came the 23rd of December on the off side of the Increase, and so far that had it not been for one poor fellow, under God, I might have been in danger of perishing, this being about 9 of the clock in the morning, but blessed be God, I arrived, all spent with labour and want of drink, having drunk all my own water that nature could afford me, for the which blessing, with many other, God make me thankful.[45]

The full style reflects the Ciceronian prose which British schoolboys were taught to imitate until this century. It is a rhetorically polished style and is filled with redundant verbal pairs or doublets: ". . . with ordinances and decrees we will and require you to observe and keep, and do give you power and authority to see the same executed and put in use. . . ."[46] It contains some figurative language and occasional phrases or maxims in Latin. From 1600-19, most of the correspondence from England and about one-third of the letters written in the Indies use the full style. Here is an example:

> . . . for I know that as your Worships did in your mature wisdom and discretion bestow such a place upon me, so you should not allow of such insolency in your Generals to displace me again without cause, and so to disannul and annihilate your authority. I beseech your Worships to consider and seriously to scan this with yourselves, that of all your servants you have in these parts I am the eldest, so that

> the almond tree hath displayed his white blossoms upon my head ever since I was admitted into your service, and scarce before, in all which time I have been as careful of your public weal and as true, faithful and trusty unto you as ever was my right hand unto my left. This being so, I entreat your Worships to revolve the matter in your sage and discreet thoughts, whether I am worthy to be dismissed of the place which you yourselves bestowed upon me.[47]

The florid style is affected, reminding one that Lyly's *Euphues*, first published in 1578, was still in print during the early seventeenth century. The florid style contains many figures and numerous allusions; it uses extremely long and involved sentences; its tone is obsequious. It is rhetorically self-conscious, and, though it is by far the most ornate of the four styles, its writers apologize frequently for their slender rhetorical skills. This correspondence is clearly epideictic, designed to call attention to the writer's virtuosity and to impress his readers. This technique may have worked in Elizabethan suitors' letters,[48] but it did not impress the committees of the British East India Company: the letters in this style are regularly (and deservedly) endorsed "of no moment for any note" or even "of no moment at all." The florid style is short-lived in the Company's correspondence, perhaps because the vogue for euphuism died out, perhaps because writers learned that it defeated their goals. I have found only one writer who uses the florid style after 1620, though the ritual apology for one's "tediousness" persists throughout the century.

One example of the florid style must suffice. In the second sentence of one letter, the writer announces his fears that his "rustical discourse should in no wise be answerable to him that writeth to least effect, or that the splendent and copious advice of others may darken and obscure my slender and insignificant methods." After another half-page expounding his ignorance and unimportance, he offers the following consoling thought:

> If that haply these my precedent lines shall be censured as impertinent and too mean for this ripe and exquisite age, I desire you to consider that at the building of Solomon's temple there was room as well for burthen bearers as for other more curious artificers; whereupon I infer although in matters of greatest consequence I am not, nor greatly at present desire to be, employed, yet notwithstanding in business of reasonable importance I suppose myself of sufficiency able to do the Right Honourable and Right Worshipful Company commendable service.[49]

Perhaps the most engaging style is the colloquial. Reflecting the rhythms of speech, the colloquial style uses short sentences (the only style to do so) and common, even "vulgar" words. Its images are homey and down-to-earth, not classical or Biblical. It offers details apparently chosen to interest rather than simply to inform. It is vigorous, direct, and informal. Much of the extensive criticism to be found in the correspondence is expressed in the colloquial style.

> Be not cause of our business' ruin; you have through your sloth and negligence already put it ableeding. I go modestly on with you and I persuade you to hear me.

> Mine will be the blame, though yours the fault. If you will not hear me, know then I will be heard and make you come; and so again farewell. Take it not unkindly. I speak for our masters' good. I neither may nor will suffer the business to ruin through your stubborn wilfulness and idleness. And to speak directly to you, Mr. Barker (now the chief director and manager there of these neglects), remember yourself. . . . I bid you lovingly farewell and rest/ Your hearty grieved friend
>
> Edw. Connock [50]

Subject matter, however, does not determine style. I have been able to find only one case where two different correspondents describe a single event whose facts are not in dispute; the two writers use different styles. In 1612, the Portuguese attacked the English ship the *Dragon* and an accompanying pinnace, the *Hosiander*, off the coast of Surat. The commander of the voyage, Thomas Best, gives a detailed account of his defeat of the Portuguese in the plain style he uses in all his correspondence.

> As soon as the day gave light, I set sail and steered between them, bestirring ourselves with our best endeavors, putting 3 of the 4 ships aground on the sands thart of the bar of Surat. At 9 I anchored. This morning the Hosiander did good service, and came through also between the ships and anchored by me. Upon the flood [tide] the 3 ships on ground came off. We set sail (they at anchor) and came to them, and spent upon 3 of them 150 great shot, and in morning some 50 shot. And at night, we giving the admiral [flagship] our 4 pieces (either a whole or demi-cullvering), which came even with the top of our forecastle, shot through our david, killed one man, to wit Burrell, and shot the arm of another.[51]

It is tempting to believe that "our david," in an allusion to David and Goliath, is the tiny pinnace *Hosiander*, but the term is probably more prosaic: Foster notes that "the 'david' (modern 'davit') was a projection (of wood or iron) from the ship's bow, used in hoisting the anchor."[52]

In contrast, the account written by a factor on the voyage, Nicholas Withington, is filled with images. Withington personifies both ships, chooses adjectives suggested by the *Dragon's* name, and pictures the little *Hosiander* moving in the serpentine pattern of the hay, a country dance. He describes the encounter in full rather than plain style.

> . . . the Hosiander bravely redeemed the time she lost the day before. The firey Dragon, bestirring herself, in some three hours hot fight, drove three of the gallions on the sands, and then the Hosiander drawing little water danced the hay about them, and so paid them that they durst not show a man on their decks, killing and spoiling their men, and battered their ships exceedingly.[53]

One of the most obvious features of the style of the correspondence of this period is the length of sentences. In a sample of 30 first paragraphs by 21 different writers, the lowest number of words per sentence is 24.9 and the highest 125, with a median of 59 words per sentence. The figure of 59 words is particularly high when one recalls that letters usually have shorter sentences than writing in other genres by the same authors.[54] The writers'

fondness for compound sentences and for using semicolons rather than periods increases sentence length; however, one cannot count phrases set off by semicolons as complete sentences, for Elizabethan punctuation was basically rhythmical rather than logical or grammatical. The semicolon could indicate short independent clauses, but it was also used to set off subordinate clauses and even groups of words. Three features contribute to sentence length: numerous participial phrases; the extensive use of relative clauses, often creating involved and tortuous constructions; and redundant verbal pairs.

Given the length of individual sentences, it is not surprising that paragraphs are also quite long. None of the paragraphs in the sample I used to calculate sentence length is longer than 1106 words, but it is not uncommon for an entire letter to be a single paragraph, even when the letter runs five or ten printed pages. The commissions and journals have much shorter paragraphs than the letters, since the former documents begin a new paragraph for each new point in the instructions or for each new day.

The letters contain comparatively few grammatical errors. One does find some subject-verb agreement errors, some sentence fragments (usually the result of omitting the subject "I"), some dangling modifiers, and a fair number of comma splices and run-on sentences.

A final example, while quite atypical, is so amazing that I cannot resist quoting the last two paragraphs, which read rather like the mad scene in *Hamlet*:

> Notwithstanding I may sing *honononera*, for my trade is quite decayed. Before I had sale for my nails faster than I could make them, but now they lie on my hand. For my shoes none will sell, because long lying abed in the morning saves shoe leather, and driving of great nails puts my small nails quite out of request, yea, even with my best customer; so that where every day he had wont to buy his dozen nails in the morning, I can scarcely get his custom once in two or three. Well this world will mend one day, but beware the grey mare eat not the grinding stone. I have had two satirical letters about this matter from Mr. Peacock, which pleased him as little as me, but I think he is so paid home at his own weapon as he will take better heed how he carp without cause. It was not more to me, but broader to Mr. Cocks. I know the parties which I speak of you would gladly know; for your satisfaction herein I cannot make you know mine, because I think you never see her; but I think God made her a woman and I a W. For the other, it is such a one as hardly or no I know you would not dream of. But yet for exposition of this riddle, construe this: all is not cuckolds that wear horns. Read this reversed, Ab Dextro ad sinistro. O I G N I T A M. What, man! what is the matter? methinks you make crosses. For never muse on the matter; it is true. I am now grown poetical.
>
> He that hath a high horse may get a great fall;
> And he that hath a deaf boy, loud may he call;
> And he that hath a fair wife, sore may he dread
> That he get other folks' brats to foster and to feed.
>
> Be not a blab of your tongue, whatever I write you of henceforward condemn either to [ ] or the fire. I love and honour you as a friend and so, believe it, you

shall find me. Thus leaving, but loth to leave troubling of you, I commit us both to the protection of God, and you to my best wishes, resting

Your assured and unfeigned friend for ever and a day,
William Nelson

I say no more, affairs call me away;
My mare in the stable for provender doth stay.[56]

Tone and Tact

The conventions of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century letter writing called for the writer to adopt a stance "appropriate to [the] calling" of the reader. Thus we should write "To our betters, always with submission: to our inferiours, benignly and favorably: to our friends, lovingly: to our enemies sharply and nippingly."[57] In the ritual salutations and closes, the East India Company writers normally express the requisite submission and love. In the body of the letter, however, the tone is sometimes sharp and nipping, even though the letters are to their colleagues in the same company.

The writers are undoubtedly capable of tact, but examples of it are rare.[58] Writers are more likely to be straightforward in their criticism, even to the point of rudeness. Sir Henry Middleton, commander of the sixth voyage, rejects an idea of one of his men with the words, "I cannot be so persuaded unless I had better proof than your bare conceit"—in a letter the writer obviously sees as a generous one.[59] And we have already cited Edward Connock's "grieved" but explicit denunciation of Thomas Barker and the other factors at Shiraz.

Conclusion

The authors of the earliest correspondence of the East India Company did not have to invent the form or style of the business letter: models already existed, both in letter-writing texts and in the correspondence of earlier business ventures. But while the writers are influenced by existing theory and practice (in more ways than we have been able to suggest here), it is clear that they in no way feel bound to follow any previous example. The individuality evident in the correspondence may not always produce well organized or psychologically sound letters, but it does demonstrate that business correspondence can be both functional and fascinating.

Notes and References

1. William Foster, *A Guide to the India Office Records, 1600-1858* (London: India Office, 1919), p. vii. Most of the discarded materials were bills, catalogues, and duplicates of other documents.

2. For transcripts of the correspondence, see *The Register of Letters etc. of the Governour and Company of Merchants of London trading* [sic] *into the East Indies*,

1600-1619, ed. George Birdwood and William Foster (1893; rpt. London: Quaritch, 1965), hereafter referred to as *Register*, and *Letters Received by the East India Company from its Servants in the East, Transcribed from the 'Original Correspondence' Series of the India Office Records*, Vol. I, ed. Frederick Charles Danvers; Vol. II-VI ed. William Foster (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1896-1902), hereafter referred to as *Letters Received*. Both *Register* and *Letters Received* follow the originals in using dates based on the "old style" calendar, in which the new year was considered to begin March 25 rather than January 1. Spelling has been modernized by the editors in *Letters Received*. I have also modernized the spelling of East India Company correspondence in my quotations from *Register* and other sources, since the quaintness of seventeenth-century spelling tends to obscure the degree to which the letters may be like or unlike modern business correspondence.

3. Commission for the Third Voyage, 9 March 1606/07, *Register*, p. 130.

4. This instruction appears in the Commission for the Third Voyage (*Register*, p. 129) and is repeated with slight variations in the Commissions for the Fourth and Fifth Voyages, 29 February 1607/08 and 14 April 1609, respectively (*Register*, pp. 258, 300).

5. Thomas Keridge to the East India Company, 20 March 1614/15, *Letters Received*, III, 71-72.

6. Richard Cocks to Richard Wickham, 9 March 1613/14, *Letters Received*, III, 23.

7. Nicholas Downton to the Company, 20 June 1613, *Letters Received*, I, 268. In fact, Downton not only survived this voyage but went on to command another one.

8. For examples of comparable correspondence, see *The First Englishmen in India: Letters and Narratives of Sundry Elizabethans Written by Themselves*, ed. J. Courtenay Locke, (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1930); Richard Hakluyt, *The Principall Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589; rpt. Glasgow: James MacLehose & Sons, 1903-05), 12 vol.; *Records Relating to the Society of Merchant Adventurers of the City of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Patrick McGrath, (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1952); and J[ohn] B[rowne], *The Marchants* [sic] *Avizo* (London: 1589, rpt. ed. Patrick McGrath, Boston: Baker Library, Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, 1957; facsimile rpt. of the 4th ed. [1607] New York: Da Capo, 1969). *The Marchants Aviso* is apparently based on letters actually written by a Bristol apprentice to his master (McGrath, *Avizo*, p. xiv). It is particularly interesting because Thomas Aldworth, who was largely responsible for founding the Company's factory at Surat, was from Bristol and almost surely knew the Bristol merchant of the same name to whom the book was dedicated. The two Thomas Aldworths, however, are distinct: see Alfred B. Beaven, *Bristol Lists: Municipal and Miscellaneous* (Bristol: T. D. Taylor, Sons, and Hawkins, 1899). Beaven does not identify the second Thomas Aldworth as the merchant who later joined the East India Company, but the information given by Beaven (see esp. p. 196) and by McGrath (*Records*, pp. 3, 5, 54, 84, 117) fits with the information about the East India Company's Aldworth given by Birdwood (*Register*, p. 437n.).

9. William Robert Scott, *The Constitution and Finance of English, Scottish and Irish Joint-Stock Companies to 1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910-12), II, 93.

10. Danvers, *Letters Received*, I, xxx.

11. John Jordain to the East India Company, December, 1615, *Letters Received*, III, 274.

12. Scott, II, 124-26. Note that the "divisions" Scott cites include the original capital ventured. To determine the profit, therefore, one must deduct 100 percent from the figure he gives.

13. Scott, I, 446.

14. Scott, I, xiv.

15. Ten percent remained the legal ceiling on loans in England from 1571 to 1624, when the ceiling was lowered to 8 percent. Sidney Homes, *A History of Interest Rates* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 124.

16. According to Scott, the Company's accounting procedures were more "scientific" than those of other contemporary English companies. He suggests that its merchants may have learned accounting methods from the Italians, "pioneers in accurate bookkeeping." Scott, I, 158-59.

17. See *Register*, pp. 27-33 for the sale of pepper; p. 210 for the pepper monopoly; pp. 197-207, 479-90 for the exemption from garbling; and documents beginning on pp. 207-08, 211, 214-16, 224, 468, and 479 for the exportation of coin.

18. Gibson Mss. Vol. V, MS. 933, No. 3, in the Archepiscopal Library at Lambeth Palace. Portions of the *Propositions* are printed in Shafaat Ahmad Khan, *Sources for the History of British India in the Seventeenth Century* (1926; rpt. London: Curzon Press, 1975), p. 315.

19. This terminology was unusual, but not unique. Scott notes that most companies entrusted their management to a "governor and assistants—the number of the latter being either twelve or a multiple of twelve" and terms the East India Company an exception. I do not know of another company which also had a deputy-governor, but the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol (at least one of whom was among the original adventurers in the East India Company) also termed its directors "committees" (see McGrath, *Records*, p. 5).

20. *John Company* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1926), p. 5.

21. Scott, I, 163.

22. Foster, *John Company*, p. 17. See *Court Minutes*, March 22, 1614.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-24. The debate quoted by Foster is fascinating.

24. Of the consultations in *Letters Received*, No. 429, concerning "the sundry misdemeanours and disordered vicious life of William Leske, minister to the English factory at Surratt," is the most interesting (V, 36-38).

25. E. Keble Chatterton, *The Old East Indiamen*, 2nd ed. (1933; rpt. [London:] Conway Maritime Press, 1971), p. 88.

26. *The Voyage of Thomas Best to the East Indies, 1612-14*, ed. William Foster (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1934, 2nd series, No. 75), p. 1.

27. *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615-19, as Narrated in His Journal and Correspondence*, ed. William Foster (Rev. ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. lxx-lxxiii.

28. Quoted in Foster, *John Company*, pp. 38-39.

29. The most interesting of these therefore are those written by authors whose style is noteworthy. My favorite is "Nicholas Downton, his opinion, what fit to be done for the time next ensuing. Written in the Road of Dabul, February 24th 1611," which begins, "Environed with a swarm of perplexed thoughts. . . ." Its sentences are quite as "labyrinthine" as any in that gentlemen's letters (*Letters Received*, I, 155-61. The description of Downton's sentences is that of William Foster, ed., *The Voyage of Nicholas Downton to the East Indies, 1614-14, as Recorded in Contemporary Narratives and Letters* [London: The Hakluyt Society, 1939, Series 2, Vol. 82] p. xv).

30. The transmission time of letters within the Indies may be seen by comments made in the letters. Letters took less than a day between the captured Sir Henry Middleton in Mocha and the factors remaining in his ship just off shore; but otherwise, the shortest time recorded is from Siras to Spahan in Persia (*Letters Received*, V, 216).

Other times include 3 weeks, Firando to Miaco in Japan (*Ibid.*, III, 279); 25 days, Surat to Masulipatam in India (*Ibid.*, II, 101); 5-6 weeks, Agra to Surat in India (*Ibid.*, I, 23); two months, Bantam on Java to Firando in Japan (*Ibid.*, II, 202); and "four months' time [from Spahan in Persia] to Surat, which by a footman can hardly be performed" (*Ibid.*, V, 217).

31. These times may be seen from the endorsements on some letters recording when they were received. The shortest time appears to have been about seven months (Foster, *Voyage of Thomas Best*, p. 275). Nine months was more usual (e.g., *Letters Received*, I, 4; III, 35, 278; IV, 181), and 11 months is recorded at least once (*Ibid.*, V, 193), as is 14 months (*Diary of Richard Cocks Cape-Merchant in the English Factory in Japan 1615-1622 with Correspondence*, ed. Edward Maunde Thompson [London: The Hakluyt Society, 1883], I, 48).

32. Commission for the Third Voyage, 9 March 1606/07, *Register*, p. 114; repeated (with variations for the changing number of ships) in the commissions for voyages 4-6.

33. March, 1603/04, *Register*, pp. 53-54.

34. November, 1616, *Letters Received*, IV, 226.

35. Company to Gabriel Towerson, Robert Brown, and the factors at Bantam, 11 March 1606/08, *Register*, p. 150.

36. Letters of Edmond Aspinall, John Osterwick, and Samuel Juxon received these endorsements, Juxon's receiving the latter. *Letters Received*, III, 35; IV, 181; and III, 37, respectively.

37. Scott, I, 162.

38. See, for example, Richard Cocks to Richard Wickham, 5 February 1613/14: "Also the Captain Chinesa is fallen at square with his new wife and hath given her a wacadash [a short sword] bidding her cut off her little finger, which she had done had she not been prevented per Maria, Hamando's woman, who paid dear for it, having her left thumb almost cut off" (*Letters Received*, II, 18). Cocks also wrote to William Eaton, who repeats the incident in a letter 1 March 1613/14 (*Letters Received*, II, 20).

39. William Nicholls to the agent at Bantam, 15 January 1615/16, *Letters Received*, IV, 7.

40. Richard Cocks to Richard Wickham, 25 April 1616, *Letters Received*, IV, 96; *Court Minutes*, 23 September 1617, quoted in *Ibid.*, VI, xxxix.

41. *The English Secretary, or Methods of Writing Epistles and Letters* (1599 ed.; rpt. intro. Robert O. Evans, Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967), pp. 2-3. Other books which cite brevity as a characteristic of good letters include W[illiam F[ulwood], *The Enimie of Idlenesse: Teaching a perfect platforme how to indite Epistles and Letters of all sortes* (London: Henrie Middleton, 1586), p. 42, and John Hoskins, *Directions for Speech and Style*, ed. Hoyt H. Hudson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1935), p. 4.

42. Day, pp. 2-3, 14, resp. Spelling modernized.

43. Samuel Bradshaw to the principal resident at Bantam, 10 February 1612/13, *Letters Received*, I, 255.

44. Nicholas Ufflet to George Ball, 3 June 1617, *Letters Received*, V, 298.

45. William Pemberton to Sir Henry Middleton, 5 March 1610/11, *Letters Received*, I, 56.

46. Commission for the First Voyage [February 1600/01], *Register*, p. 5. Verbal pairs are ubiquitous in the correspondence from the Company in London. There is considerable variation in the factors' letters; some use verbal pairs far more frequently than others.

47. Joseph Salbank to the Company, November, 1616, *Letters Received*, IV, 227-28.

48. See Frank Whigham, "The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," *PMLA*, 96 (1981), 864-82.

49. Samuel Juxon to Sir Thomas Smith (Governor of the Company), 2 March 1614/15, *Letters Received*, III, 35-36.

50. Edward Connock to Thomas Barker, George Pley, Edward Pettus, and William Bell, 8 May 1617, *Letters Received*, V, 217.

51. *Voyage of Thomas Best*, pp. 35-36.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 36n.

53. *A Journey over Land* (1735), rpt. in *Voyage of Thomas Best*, p. 218.

54. In a study of the prose of Marvell, Bacon, and Sidney, Robert Cluett found that all three used markedly shorter sentences in their letters than they did in other prose genres (*Prose Style and Critical Reading* [New York: Teachers College Press, 1976], p. 31).

55. See Mindele Treip, *Milton's Punctuation and Changing English Usage, 1582-1676* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 14, 43, 29, resp.

56. William Nealson to Richard Wickham, February, 1614/15, *Letters Received*, II, 72-73. As this is apparently the only surviving document of which Nealson is the sole author, it is impossible to determine whether he always sounded like this. Cocks alleges that Nealson was "seldom sober" (*Diary*, II, 265); drunkedness would be a plausible explanation for Nealson's style in this letter.

57. Day, p. 4. Spelling modernized.

58. See however William Edwards to the Company, *Letters Received*, II, 154, for a very tactful correction.

59. Sir Henry Middleton to Lawrence Femell, 22 May 1611, *Letters Received*, I, 121.

The Etiquette of American Business Correspondence

L. W. Denton
IBM Corporation

When "the incomparable Max" Beerbohm, British humorist and essayist, satirized in 1910 the many letter writing manuals which were so popular at the time, he put into words the thoughts that many of us echo today. Generally, those of us who teach business correspondence are suspicious of the popular letter writing manuals we see on sale in bookstores and through business book clubs. We assume that they may be superficial and that their readers may be tempted to copy the many model letters, just as our students are tempted to copy textbook models. Beerbohm says that if we listen carefully, we may hear ". . . borne up to us a sound of the scratching of innumerable pens—pens whose wielders are all trying, as the author of this handbook urges them, to be 'original, fresh, and interesting' by dint of more or less strict adherence to sample."[1] "How true," we mutter in sympathetic agreement.

Today, the letter writing manuals are still very much with us—in ever growing numbers. The manuals displayed in the book racks and the many business writing texts in use today are direct descendants of etiquette manuals, especially those from the period 1850-1900. A survey of some of these manuals provides both an interesting excursion into our Victorian past and a study in the evolution of the modern business letter.

All of us, though we may not have flipped through an etiquette manual recently, know what to expect: guides to graceful social behavior, discourses on proper table manners, advice on making polite and witty conversation, hints on proper dress and hygiene, and suggestions on wording graceful invitations to dinner parties. All of this is common etiquette manual fare.

We're a little surprised, however, to find space given to writing appropriate inscriptions on tombstones, on the language and sentiment of flowers (to send a purple pansy, for instance, is to say, "You occupy my thoughts"), on overcoming the bad habits of some horses, on the "evil effects of pernicious literature upon boys and girls," and on proper techniques for organizing a Fourth of July procession. Surely this is more than we bargained for.

And, given our perspective of the sophisticated 1980's, we anticipate (and hope for) some delightful Victorian humor. We're certainly not disappointed. Our manual cites this wonderful example of a *faux pas* committed by a sweet young lady eager to appear sophisticated: "Did you see the Dardanelles on your trip abroad?" she was asked. "Oh, yes," she replied, "we had dinner with them several times." We wonder in speculative amazement about the readers of some of the manuals. One advises its readers that it is inappropriate at dinner to "pull the hostess' chair out from under her, or gleefully kick the shins of your neighbor under the table and shout 'Guess who?'" We're amused and slightly horrified at Fanny Fern's advice to ladies: "Always keep callers waiting, till they have had time to notice the outlay of money in your parlors" and at W. A. Alcott's pronouncement that wearing one's hat in the house "tends to vice and immorality." And, always, those horrible puns and word-plays: "Don't propose to a girl at a Horse Show; she may respond with a 'Neigh.'"

The etiquette manuals of the 19th century were found in almost every home and significantly affected American life. Schlesinger points out that early etiquette books published in this country were imitations of English and French manuals and that most Americans were not particularly concerned with etiquette until the early 19th century. Most early settlers were more concerned with eking out a living than with proper social graces. In addition, most immigrants to this country were from the lower economic classes, a majority were men (and thus lacked the traditionally feminine concern with social graces), and most reveled in the tendency to unsophisticated brash behavior typical of this country where the frontier lay only a few days' ride away.[2]

But once the country was settled and once a prosperous middle class began to emerge, especially after the Civil War, many turned their attention to imitating their European counterparts who had developed the finer points of an established code of manners. As an example of increased concern with etiquette, Schlesinger cites publications figures that show increased public awareness of the need for proper etiquette. In the 1830's, in addition to revisions and new editions, some 28 different manuals appeared; in the 1840's at least 36 new ones appeared, and during the 1850's, 38 more were published.[3]

Etiquette manuals attempted to meet new needs and social demands as many of the newly rich sought to achieve social status worthy of their new wealth. Travel abroad flourished as more people had the resources necessary for foreign travel. Financial prosperity can be measured, in part, by these figures: in 1889, 120 individuals in the country reportedly earned more than a million dollars a year. In 1902, that number had increased to more than 3,500![4] Also promoting the etiquette cause were regular columns in newspapers, a

number of ladies' magazines (especially *Godey's Lady's Book*), and an army of teachers and lecturers. Publishing houses produced an annual average of four or five new titles for more than 40 years.

Growing Concern with Business Correspondence

Even the very earliest manuals generally included a section on correspondence, especially social correspondence—called "epistolary Etiquette" in Duffey's *Complete Etiquette* (1877). Instructions to the writer and various model letters to fit almost every situation were presented. Readers learned to write letters to relatives ("Women always write these best," says Duffey; "They should give little gossipy items about neighbors and acquaintances"),[5] to casual friends, to intimate friends of the opposite sex, to employers, to city officials, and so on.

During the 1840's and 1850's, many manuals began to devote more attention to business letters, but with less emphasis and coverage than in the manuals written after the Civil War. During the 1870's many manuals began to carry entire chapters on business correspondence, and, as prosperity hit the nation in the 1880's and 1890's, some manuals developed fairly thorough treatments of application letters, collection letters, letters of inquiry, and letters conveying good news, bad news, and congratulations. Not until after the turn of the century, however, did book-length treatments of effective business correspondence begin to appear. The standard business correspondence manual we know today really did not appear until the 1920's.

How do treatments of business letters differ from those today? The manuals provide notable differences, as well as some similarities, in offering advice to letter writers, in their treatments of format, in matters of style and in recognition of human relations as an important consideration in writing. The following section addresses these differences and presents several model letters from some of the manuals. The few manuals cited here were especially popular in their day and were similar to scores of competitors.

General Advice to Writers

The most obvious difference between the brief sections on business correspondence in the manuals and the textbooks we use in our classes is the amount of advice given to the reader. Most manuals offer very little advice of a general nature, relying instead on examples presented for the reader to study or copy. Modern textbooks, of course, thoroughly analyze and dissect examples, present checklists and outlines, and offer detailed commentary on good and bad examples.

One of the most comprehensive treatments of business letters occurs in *Hill's Manual*, where the writer is admonished to write "in a manner such as to secure the respect and consideration of the person with whom you correspond." This list of guidelines has much to offer students of today, though we might wish to add additional points:

> 1. In letters of business, use as few words as possible.
> 2. Business letters should be promptly answered.
> 3. Use a clear, distinct writing, avoiding all flourish of penmanship or language.
> 4. Come at once to your subject, and state it so clearly that it will not be necessary to guess your meaning.
> 5. Give town, county, state and date explicitly. It is frequently of great importance to know *when* a letter was written.
> 6. Read your letter carefully when finished, to see that you have made no omissions and mistakes. Also carefully examine your envelope to see that it is rightly directed, with postage-stamp affixed.
> 7. Copy all business letters, of your own, by hand, or with the copying press made for the purpose.
> 8. Send money by Draft, P.O. Money-Order, or Express, taking a receipt therefor; thus you have something to show for money guarantying you against loss. Always state in your letter the amount of money you send, and by what means sent.
> 9. Write date, and by whom sent, across the end of each letter received, and file for future reference, fastening the letters together with rubber bands, or binding in a letter-file adapted to the purpose. The possession of a letter sometimes prevents litigation and serious misunderstanding.[6]

Few other manuals provide such extensive advice.

Several do caution the reader against slavishly imitating the models offered as examples, praising instead the virtues of originality. Hill suggests:

> Do not be guilty of using that stereotyped phrase, 'Dear Friend: I now take my pen in hand to let you know that I am well, and hope you are enjoying the same great blessing.' Be original. You are not exactly like any one else. Your letter should be a representation of yourself, not of anybody else. The world is full of imitators in literature, who pass on, leaving no reputation behind them. Occasionally originals come up, and fame and fortune are ready to do them service. The distinguished writers of the past and present have gone aside from the beaten paths. Letter writing affords a fine opportunity for the display of originality. In your letter be yourself; write as you would talk.[7]

Duffey adds these thoughts: "A 'letter-writer' is prepared for the purpose of giving immediate aid to those who require it. But the way to rise above such need is to study the best models of epistolary literature, which may be found largely in biographies of noted men and women, and afterward to practice letter writing carefully and conscientiously."[8] This advice is as good today as it was then.

Specific bits of advice relating to individual types of letters also appear, but the manual writers rely on examples rather than commentary for teaching purposes.

Differences in Letter Format

The manual writers of the period had not yet classified letter formats as block, modified block, and so on. In fact, letter formats varied considerably, the reader having no explanation for the presentation of a specific format for modeling purposes. Here is a typical example from the early 1880's:

Denver, May 13, 1881.[9]

Mr. George Stone,

DEAR SIR: Samuel Adams, having applied to me for the position of clerk, refers me to you for a character. I feel particularly anxious to obtain a good clerk for the coming winter, and shall therefore feel obliged by your making me acquainted with any particulars referring to his character, and remain, sir,

Your very obedient servant,

George Stark

The most commonly used salutations from the period are these:
Dear Sir: Dear Madam: Dear Sirs: My Dear Mrs. ———.
Specific concern with personalizing salutations is more recent. Interesting changes in recommended forms of address for individuals of high political office certainly are striking. Young suggests that "The President of the United States or Governors of States, are addressed 'Your Excellency.'" No longer, of course.

Most of us joke with our students about those old bromide complimentary closings, such as "Your most humble & obed't servant." But sure enough, many manuals recommend coupling the closing with the signature, with these examples occurring most frequently: Yours, Very Respectfully; I Remain, Very Respectfully; Your Obedient Servant. "Your Very Obedient Servant" occurs more frequently in the 1860's and 1870's and is especially common in the model application letters.

Letter Organization

Today's textbooks provide lengthy discussions of organizational patterns for various types of letters, with outlines and checklists aplenty. But little such instruction is given in the manuals. Hill's admonition to "come at once to your subject, and state it so clearly that it will not be necessary to guess your meaning" apparently ruled. Nowhere are there letters following today's sacred organizational pattern for refusal letters. In every case, the writer opens with a direct statement of the bad news: "I regret that all the money I have at liberty I am compelled to use this afternoon; else I would comply with your request with pleasure." If buffer paragraphs were used, they were decidedly uncommon.

Nor is there consistency in paragraphing. Many sample letters in the manuals consist of only one paragraph—even fairly lengthy letters applying for a "situation." On the other hand, many letters (apparently depending on the inclination of the manual writer) consist of several choppy, one-sentence paragraphs.

Application Letters: A Case in Point

Applications for a "situation" are among the most interesting examples in the manuals. The differences between them and our present "state-of-the-art" letters are significant. Hill's manual provides classic advice on writing the application letter: "As a hundred different persons will sometimes make application for one position, which will be given to the individual writing the best letter, everything else being equal, this illustrates in a striking manner the importance of being able to write a letter elegantly and correctly."[10] Most of us, I suspect, tell our students the same thing.

Because the applicant enclosed no résumé, he or she had to rely heavily on the quality of his or her references. Each etiquette manual surveyed dedicated very thorough coverage to letters asking, giving, and refusing recommendations. Most model applications are brief, similar to the two below:

New York, March 1, 1880.[11]

MESSRS. LORD & NOBLE,

Dear Sirs:

Having heard that you are in need of more assistance in your establishment I venture to ask you for employment. I can refer you to Messrs. Jones & Smith, my late employers, as to my qualifications should you decide to consider my application.

Yours truly,

James Roberts

Philadelphia, Pa., Feb. 1, 1877.[12]

Mr. James Wilson,

Sir: Having heard that a vacancy is likely soon to occur in your office, I venture to write to you, asking you to put my name upon your list of applicants for the situation. I think I can give you satisfactory evidence of my abilities to discharge the duties of the post, if you decide to consider my application.

Respectfully,

THOMAS MARSHALL

Most of us would criticize these letters for lack of development, for weak organization, for lack of specifics, and a host of things which they lack. Some manuals presented longer, more detailed versions such as these.

1184 Longworth St., Cincinnati, O., May 1, 18—.[13]

DEAR SIR:

In reply to your advertisement in to-day's "Commercial" for a clerk or assistant bookkeeper, I beg to offer my services to your firm.

I have been in the employ of Mr. Wm. H. Wilson for the past four years, until he sold out his business a few days ago, having kept the books of his house during the time.

He permits me to refer to him for any testmonial of character or ability which you may require.

Should my application meet your views, it will be my earnest endeavor to faithfully and punctually fulfill the duties required. I have the honor to remain,

Yours, Very Respectfully,

HOMER BUXTON.

Maplewood, Mass., April 4, 18—.[14]

DEAR SIR:

Observing the enclosed advertisement in this morning's "Herald," I improve the opportunity by writing you an application for the place, as I am at present disengaged.

I graduated four years ago at Mrs. Willard's Seminary, Troy, N.Y., since which time I conducted the literary department of Frank Leslie's "Magazine of Fashion" up to October last, when failing health, resulting from too much close confinement, compelled me to travel abroad, from which journey, principally through England and France, I have just returned, with health completely restored.

I beg to refer you to Mr. Leslie for testimonials. Being exceedingly fond of literary pursuits, I shall be happy to occupy the position you offer, if mutually agreeable.

Yours, Most Respectfully,

Harriet Sibley.

Certainly these letters provide more information useful to a prospective employer than do the two shorter ones. The applicants provide no evidence, however, of their expertise or qualifications, other than simply stating where they worked. Today, we urge our students to emphasize particular skills and useful job experience, as well as responsibilities and accomplishments. Because we stress the positive so much, most of us might gag at the reference to "failing health" causing Harriet Sibley to lose her "situation" with Frank Leslie.

A sampling of application letter examples produces models for positions of assistant bookkeeper, assistant editor, chambermaid, governess, clerk, cook, gardener, coachman, apprentice dressmaker, music-teacher, and printer. This tendency to overdo the classification by types is the cause for one of Max Beerbohm's sharpest barbs when he refers to model letters such as those from "a young lady in answer to invitation from old schoolmistress" or "reproaching Fiancee for being a Flirt." Indeed, such examples exist. Thankfully, at least in our texts today we have moved in the direction of general types of letters such as refusals or inquiries or persuasive requests and less in the limited direction of narrowly defined categories.

By examining the etiquette manuals of the Victorian period we better appreciate our own heritage and recognize that indeed the business letter (just as table etiquette and mode of dress) constantly evolves.

The last few decades have been a period of fairly uniform practices, but we also are now seeing attempts to suggest changes in letter format. A hundred years from now, readers may think our business communication texts quaint examples of the constant evolution of the business letter, just as we view the manuals produced by our Victorian predecessors.

At this point, the writer of this article feels compelled to heed one final bit of advice from Hill's manual:

> If wearied with continued sitting, cease writing. Lay down the pen, step forth into the fresh air, throw back the arms, expand the chest, inflate the lungs, and exercise.[15]

Notes and References

1. Max Beerbohm, "How Shall I Word It?" *And Even Now and A Christmas Garland* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1960), p. 12.

2. Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Learning How to Behave* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946), p. viii. Schlesinger surveys the development and influences of etiquette manuals in America from Puritan times to the 1940's. He aptly places concerns for proper etiquette squarely in the context of sociological and economic developments in this country's history.

3. Schlesinger, p. 18. The author provides an excellent bibliography and notes section, including hundreds of etiquette manuals.

4. Guernsey Camp, Jr., *et al. The New England Situation* (Chicago, 1927), pp. 23-25.

5. Eliza B. Duffey, *The Ladies' and Gentlemen's Etiquette. A Complete Manual of the Manners and Dress of American Society* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Co., 1877), p. 111.

6. Thomas E. Hill, *Hill's Manual of Social & Business Forms*. All references to Hill are to selected excerpts from Hill's Manual, reprinted in *Never Give A Lady A Restive Horse* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1969).

7. Hill, p. 54.

8. Duffey, p. 322.

9. John A. Young, *Our Department* (Atlanta: Southeastern Publishing Co., 1884), p. 263.
10. Hill, p. 60.
11. Young, p. 262.
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13. Hill, p. 61.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
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The Communication Theory of Johann Carl May: Its Influence on Business Communication in Germany

Herbert W. Hildebrandt
University of Michigan
Iris Varner
Illinois State University

If one were to compile a history of business communication in Germany, that history would include Johann Carl May's *Versuch in Handlungs-Briefen, und grösseren Aufsätzen, nach den Gellertschen Regeln. Nebst einer Abhandlung von dem Guten Geschmack in Handlungs-Briefen.* (Attempt in Business Letters and Longer Reports According to Gellert's Rules. Including a Treatise on Good Taste in Business Letters.) This work is significant for two reasons.

First, it depends upon a preceding work by Christian Fürchtegott Gellert entitled *Briefe nebst einer praktischen Abhandlung von dem Guten Geschmacke in Briefen.* (Letters and a Practical Treatise of Good Taste in Letters.) It was this work, published in 1751, which paved the way for subsequent German works on writing. The title of May's book indicates that Gellert's book had fast become known and that his principles were considered worth following. The second part of May's title is almost identical with Gellert's title; both stress good taste in letters, *den guten Geschmack.* The title also indicates how highly May considered Gellert's achievements. His is an attempt to follow Gellert, meaning that Gellert set very high standards which would be difficult to reach. This attitude is also expressed in the preface to the first edition where May almost apologizes that his book is not for *Gelehrte* (men of letters) but only for *Handelsleute* (merchants).[1]

Second, May is important because his is the first book on business letters which follows the "new" rules, in theory and example. May takes Gellert's principles and applies them to business situations.

May was not the first to focus on business communication as seen in letters; he was preceded by Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi who had written on

business letters in 1755, *Anweisungen zu einer guten Deutschen Schreibart und allen in Geschäften und Rechtssachen vorfallenden schriftlichen Ausarbeitungen.* (Guidelines For a Good German Style And All Written Communications in Business and Law.) Justi's theoretical approach is similar to that of Gellert and May. While May demands a natural style, Justi distinguishes between private letters and letters to higher people. His examples are almost exclusively letters to persons of high social rank. These letters require special formulas, use of titles, etc. and are therefore closer to the *stylus curiae*.[2] They are not illustrations of his theoretical principles.[3]

May is the first to write business letters that are in harmony with the new stylistic principles. Thus the work by May holds a significant position in Germany, a country heavily involved in foreign trade during the 18th century. To position May more precisely in his period, and in the history of business communication, our analysis is threefold: (1) antecedent influences on May; (2) May's theory of business communication in Germany; and (3) May's letters as exemplifying his theory.

Influences on May

Until the end of the 17th century the mastery of the *stylus curiae* was considered essential for anyone who wanted to write good letters in German. Letters were composed according to set rules of style and organization: antecedes, connexio, amplificatio, conclusio.[4] Not only were there rules binding for the organization of the letter, but set formulas had been developed for a greater number of situations. The expression of individual thoughts in letters was almost impossible. Since the *stylus curiae* had reached a climax in the church of the middle ages, letters were full of Latin phrases that most people did not understand. It took Germany a long time to free itself from the overuse of foreign words and develop the German language to a level where it could be used to express complex ideas and thought processes in the vernacular.

Developments Before Gellert

Several people stand out because of their attempts to refine the German language. Luther is probably best known for his effort to unify German. The translation of the Bible gave Germany a national language for the first time. People after him continued to give the language form so it could be used in poetry and live up to the demands of artistic forms like ode and sonnet.

During the 17th century Martin Opitz laid down rules for German as a language of poetry in his *Büchlein von der deutschen Poeterei.* (Little Book of German Poetry.) He wanted to show that German could be used in literature just as well as any other language.

In the century after Opitz the mastery of form gained in importance. The German princes attained more independence during that time. Each one tried to create his own empire. Life at court became refined, polite, the baroque gave way to the *rokoko*. This development is also reflected in the style of letters. The *stylus curiae* is somewhat replaced by the *Hofstil* (court style), practices at court. A letter written according to the *Hofstil* is supposed to be clear, elegant, and short. But, as Nickisch points out, the definition of these words is directly tied to what is considered acceptable behavior at court. Standards are set at court, not by the common people.[5] The elegance of the *Hofstil* begins to require its own formulas which in many ways are not different from those of the *stylus curiae*. Free expression of thoughts is difficult with the emphasis on form in both styles. The theory of the *Hofstil* still encourages formalities, patterns, ceremonial expressions, and foreign words.

German language and literature were at another low point when Gottsched, professor at the University of Leipzig, turned against the Baroque deformities of and the foreign elements in the German language in the first half of the 18th century. Gottsched wrote a grammar for the German language. He also encouraged the writing of a German dictionary; in short, he attempted to make German fit for literature. Gottsched considered it his task to revitalize the language, to develop it to a point where it was strong enough to express complex thought processes and encourage creativity. His *Sprachschöpferische Tätigkeit* cannot be overestimated because it provided the basis for Gellert's new approaches to writing letters.

Gellert

Gellert, like Johann Christoph Gottsched, was a professor at the University of Leipzig, and Gellert too was deeply concerned about the state of the German language. In 1742, Gellert published *Belustigungen des Verstandes und des Witzes*, (Pleasures of reason and intellect), which contained the *"Gedanken von einem guten deutschen Briefe, an den Herrn F. H.v.W."* (Thoughts about a good German Letter to Mr. F. H.v.W.) These thoughts already contain most of Gellert's principles for writing. Gellert's later book, *Briefe nebst einer praktischen Abhandlung von dem guten Geschmacke in Briefen (1751)*, (Letters and a Practical Treatise of Good Taste in Letters) expands on the theory and develops it in more depth, but the basic ideas are the same in both publications.

Gottsched's work obviously began to bear fruit, and Germany was ready for the direction that Gellert gave. Gellert's book went through ten editions in the 18th century.

At first glance the title of Gellert's book looks rather conventional, presenting another of the *Briefsteller* (Recipe Book For Letter Writing). The

book seems to promise patterns and precise rules for writing various letters. However, the title is misleading to some extent. The letters are examples of the principles discussed, and they *follow* the discussion of the *guten Geschmack* in letters contrary to what the title indicates. The emphasis is on the theoretical foundation for writing letters, not on the giving of examples that should be copied routinely. In fact, Gellert opposes the strict following of any rules; as a result he also rejects the *Briefsteller*.

Alle die künstlichen Methoden, nach welchen uns unsre Briefsteller Gemeiniglich lehren wollen, wie man einen Brief ordnen und seine Gedanken in gewisse Behältnisse zwingen soll, in die sie sich meistentheils nicht schicken, sind niemanden anzupreisen. . . . Die Erfinder dieser Künste haben es unstreitig gut gemeint, aber ihre gute Meynung, jungen Leuten das Briefschreiben zu erleichtern hat vielleicht mehr Schaden angerichtet, als wenn sie die schlimmste Absicht gehabt hätten. . . . Sie geben uns gewisse Angangs-und Schluss-Formeln, gewisse Verbindungwörter, die im Umgange nicht gerbräuchlich sind. . . . Der Gebrauch dieser Methoden ist unstreitig an dem schlimmen Geschmacke in Briefen hauptsächlich Ursache, der lange Zeit in Deutschland geherrscht hat. . . . Das beste Mittel diese Methoden zu widerlegen, sind die guten Briefe der Alten und Neuen. Und aus diesen Exempeln sehen wir nichts mehr, als dass es keine abgemessne Ordnung giebt, die man schon im Vorrath hat, ehe man den Brief schreibt: sondern dass die Vorstellung des Inhaltes jedesmal die Einrichtung giebt.[6]

(All the artificial methods which our experts on letters are eager to teach us, how to organize a letter, and how to force the ideas into certain forms which usually do not fit, should not be held up as examples for anyone. . . . The inventors of these methods were well meaning without doubt, but their good intentions to make letter writing easier for young people have caused more damage than if they had had bad intentions. . . . They give us certain beginning and ending formulas, certain connecting phrases which are not used in everyday language. . . . The use of these methods is undoubtedly the reason for the poor taste in letters. . . . The best remedy for these bad methods is the study of good letters, old and new ones. . . . From these examples one can see that there is no definite order one can determine before writing the letters; but that the content in each case provides the order.)

1. Gellert's Stylistic Principles. Gellert establishes several basic principles that have to be followed if a letter is to be good. (1) A letter has to have the character of a conversation. (2) A letter has to be natural. (3) A letter has to be individual and personal. The following is a discussion on how Gellert attempts to realize these principles.

a. Conversational. "*So viel ist gewiss, dass wir in einem Briefe mit einem andern reden, und dass dasjenige, was ich auf ein Blatt schreibe, nichts anders ist, als was ich ihm mündlich sagen würde, wen ich könnte oder wollte.*"[7] (It is certain that we talk to each other in a letter, and that what I write down on paper is nothing else but what I would tell him orally if I could or wanted to.)

In the 1751 book this reads *"Das erste, was uns bey einem Briefe einfällt, ist dieses, dass er die Stelle eines Gesprächs vertritt."* (The first that comes to mind when thinking about a letter is that it takes the place of a conversation.)[8]

Considering the *stylus curiae* and its formulas, Gellert's demands for the *Gesprächscharakter* of a letter seems to break with all tradition. However, Gellert does not say that a letter is a conversation, but that it should imitate the good conversation. He strongly distinguishes between educated and uneducated talk. *"Ein Brief ist kein ordentliches Gespräch; es wird also in einem Briefe nicht alles erlaubt seyn, was im Umgange erlaubt ist. . . . Er ist eine freye Nachahmung des guten Gesprächs."*[9] (A letter is no ordinary conversation; therefore in a letter not everything is allowed that is permissible in everyday speech. . . . It is a free imitation of the good conversation.) This is so because *"man hat mehr Zeit, wenn man schreibt, als wenn man spricht. Man kann also, ohne Gefahr unnatürlich zu werden, etwas sorgfältiger in der Wahl seiner Gedanken und Worte, in der Verbindung derselben seyn."*[10] (One has more time when one writes than when one talks. Therefore one can, without danger of becoming unnatural, be more careful in the choice of one's thoughts and words, and in their formulation and connection.)

Gellert's demand for the *natürliche*, the natural, is connected with the conversational character of a letter.

Die Worte und Redensarten eines Briefes müssen also im gemeinen Leben nicht ungewöhnlich, obgleich nicht die gewöhnlichsten, sie müssen gebräuchlich, aber auch gut und richtig, und nicht allein einzeln, sondern auch im Zusammenhangfe, üblich seyn. Wer Briefe schön schreiben will, muss nicht so wohl schreiben, wie ein jeder im gemeinen Leben reden, sondern wie eine Person im Umgange ohne Zwang sprechen würde, welche die Wohlredenheit völlig in ihrer Gewalt hätte, welche schön redte, ohne dass die Ausdrücke sich von den Ausdrücken andrer so weit entfernten, dass der Unterschied dem Ohre gleich merklich würde.[11]	(The words and phrases of a letter must not be unusual in everyday life. Although they should not be the most common, they should be customary and also good and correct not just by themselves but also in context. Who wants to write letters well should not write as everybody talks in everyday life but as a person would talk who mastered good conversation completely, who could talk beautifully without his expressions being so different from those of others that the ear would notice it.)

b. Natural. the meaning of the word *natürlich*, as Gellert uses it, is rather complex. It combines the elements of being concise, appropriate, tasteful, and lively.

Man muss endlich das Natürliche nicht bloss in Worten und in den	(Lastly one has to look for the natural not only in words and in the individual

einzelnen Gedanken eines Briefes, sondern in dem Ganzen, in dem Zusammenhange der Gedanken untereinander, suchen. Wenn die Gedanken aus einander herzufliessen scheinen; wenn keiner fehlt der zum Verstande nöthig ist; wenn keiner da steht, der zu nichts dienet. . . . wenn diess ist: so heisst der Zusammenhang in der Schreibart und in Briefen natürlich. Man wird also bey dem Natürlichen nicht bloss mit dem Leichten zu frieden seyn nüssen, sondern immer noch nöthig haben, eine Wahl in denen Gedanken zu treffen, welche sich hierher am besten am feinsten, am kürzesten, am lebhaftesten ausdrücken können.[12]

thoughts of a letter, but in the whole, in the relationship of the thoughts. When the ideas seem to flow out of each other, when no idea is missing which is necessary in the understanding of the whole, when no idea is there that has no purpose. . . . when all this occurs, the context and the style of letters is natural. To reach the natural one cannot just be satisfied with the simple but one still has to make a choice of those thoughts which fit best, which express the matter not just in the clearest but also in the most refined, most concise, and vivid way.)

Natürlich definitely does not mean everyday. The *stylus curiae* is rejected, the artificial phrases and forms are ridiculed, but writing based on Gellert's principles requires discipline and understanding of people and situations, and an ability to analyze them.

Ein guter Brief muss natürlich, deutlich, lebhaft, und nach der Absicht der Sache überzeugend sein.[13]

(A good letter has to be clear, vivid, and according to the situation, convincing.)

Der erste Begriff, den wir mit dem Natürlichen, ins besondere in Briefen, zu verbinden pflegen, ist das Leichte; dieses entsteht aus der Richtigkeit und Klarheit der Gedanken, und aus der Deutlichkeit des Ausdrucks.[14]

(The first idea which we connect with the natural, especially in letters, is the light, and unaffected style; this comes from the correctness and clarity of the thoughts, and the clearness of the expression.)

c. Personal. Gellert also insists that the language of letters has to be adapted to the situation. Everyday matters require a simpler language than special occasions. His rejection of elaborate symbols and metaphors comes directly out of his rejection of the Baroque extremes, the overabundance of decorative style elements. Yet, Gellert does not want the plain style of everyday language either. He explains his principle of natural style to the reader by examining letters from other writers. His thorough and critical analysis shows an awareness of the German language, the logic of thought and the structure of sentences that was not present in any of his predecessors. Gellert insists that the situation should dictate the organization of a letter.

Man setzt gemeiniglich, was in der Sache das erste ist, voran. Man fährt mit den Vorstellungen fort, wie sie sich darbieten, und man hört auf, wenn man

(Usually one puts first what comes first in a matter. One continues with the presentation of things as they appear and finishes when one believes to have

glaubt, das Nothwendigste gesagt zu haben. Dieses ist auch der Plan zu einem Briefe. Man bediene sich also keiner künstlichen Ordnung, keiner mühsamen Einrichtungen, sondern man überlasse sich der freywilligen Folge seiner Gedanken, und setze sie nacheinander hin, wie sie in uns entstehen.[15]

said what is necessary. This is also the plan for a letter. One should not use an artificial order, no laborious rules but follow the voluntary sequence of one's ideas and put them down as they arise in us.)

2. Omission of Rules. While Gellert insists that formal education is not necessary to cultivate the qualities for writing good letters, it is obvious that education and social experiences in an educated society do help in developing the sensitivity and the skill to write well.

How can one learn to write well? The traditional *Briefsteller* had given numerous examples of letters, outlines, and patterns for a variety of occasions that only had to be copied and filled in with the particulars. Gellert throws these rules out but does not provide any detailed rules to take the place of the old ones.

Man darf nur die Natur, die Absicht eines Briefs zu Rathe Ziehen, und einige Grundsätze der Beredsamkeit zu Hülfe nehmen: so wird man sich die nöthigsten Regeln, welche die Briefe fordern, leicht entwerfen können.

(One only has to consider the nature and purpose of a letter and consult some of the principles of eloquence: then one can easily design the most necessary rules which letters require.)

The reader might feel rather disappointed at this stage because he is really on his own. Gellert develops his five principles, discusses, explains, and analyzes them by criticizing and rewriting poor examples. He does not, however, provide the reader with a convenient checklist but rather insists that careful observation and study of circumstances will help in adapting the style and the words to a special situation.

3. Imitation of Good Examples. Gellert does not provide an easy cure. He who wants to write well needs determination. Since he considers the quality of most printed German letters poor, he gives the following advice for improvement: "*Will man sich selber im Briefschreiben üben: so wird man sehr wohl thun, wenn man im Anfange gute Briefe übersetzt.*[17] (If one wants to practice writing letters, one is well advised to translate good letters in the beginning.)

However, translating is not understood as a verbatim transposing of a letter but as a rethinking and retelling in one's own language which, of course, requires the mastery of at least two languages. This is evidence that Gellert is writing for the educated middle class. In addition to reading good letters in French and Latin, particularly Plinius and Cicero, and translating them into German, he believes that a free imitation of the masters will help students to develop a natural and tasteful style.

4. Exemplary Friendship Letters. To demonstrate his theory, Gellert gives 73 examples of letters after the discussion of the theoretical foundation. They are on a variety of topics. Some give insights into the life of the time; some talk about the hardship of travel; one talks about the education of women; most, however, are letters of friendship. In some cases the emotional language of friendship is embarrassing for the modern reader. Most of us feel rather uncomfortable when reading sentences as the following:

Ehe wir noch miteinander reden, so erlauben Sie mir, dass ich Ihnen in Gedanken etliche Dutzend Mäulchen geben darf. . . . Auf die Mäulchen will ich Ihnen nunmehr sagen, dass ich Ihnen recht herzlich gut bin, und dass ich von Ihrer freundschaftlichen Seele eben dieses erwarte.[18]

(Before we talk to each other, permit me to give you in my thoughts several dozen kisses. . . . After the kisses I would now like to tell you that I am very fond of you and that I expect the same from your friendly soul.)

This is a letter from a man to a married woman. A letter between two men reads like this: "*Schreiben Sie mir nicht mehr so schöne Briefe, wie der letzte war, ich stehe sonst nicht dafür, dass ich nicht ein wenig eifersüchtig auf Sie werden sollte, so sehr ich Sie auch liebe.*"[19] (Don't write me any more of those beautiful letters like the last one, otherwise I cannot guarantee that I won't become somewhat jealous of you as much as I love you.)

And another one:

Wenn Sie wüssten, wie lieb ich Sie hätte, und wie lieb ich Sie stets haben werde, und wenn Sie zugleich wüssten, dass ich künftig eben nicht fleissiger an Sie schreiben werde, als zeither; so würden Sie etwas wissen, das nicht recht zusammenhängt, und das demungeachtet sehr wahr ist.[20]

(If you knew how much I love you, and if you knew also that I won't write to you more often in the future than in the past, then you would know something that does not make sense but which is nevertheless true.)

One easily gets the feeling that many of the letters are written for the sake of writing, to make pleasant and polite conversation. There is little content, little communication other than the longing, the feeling and sentiment for the friend who has left—often just for a few days. Each letter by itself may be sincere, but a whole collection of them strikes the modern reader as repetitious and monotonous.

However, the letters and the language do have to be seen in the context of the time. This was the beginning of the *Freundschaftskult*, the beginning of the cultivation of personal letters. Without Gellert's work in style the German language might not have been ready for the period of *Sturm und Drang*. Goethe, for example, who studied in Leipzig while Gellert was still there, was influenced by Gellert's work. Gellert proved that the German language was capable of expressing thoughts of politeness, good behavior, humor, and

delicate emotions.[21] What Gellert's letters show, in spite of any shortcomings, is that the German language could express the same deep thoughts as French or any other language. Gellert's letters are flowing, easy to read, and, above all written in good German. As pointed out above, Gellert laid the foundation for writing good letters regardless of subject matter.

May's Theory of Business Communication

May takes Gellert's theory and applies it to one specific area: business letters and business reports. He was the first one to put the new approach successfully to practical use. As the title indicates, May bases his ideas on Gellert, but he does not just imitate Gellert. He goes beyond him in that he is able to modify Gellert's approach to fit the specific circumstances of commerce. Also, the first edition of May's book appeared in 1756, only five years after Gellert's book. Based on a reference by Gellert to May, it appears that May had been working independently on a new theory of business letters for some time before Gellert published the "Letter to Herrn F. H.v.W." where he first discussed his own principles. In the "Letter to Herrn F. H.v.W." he says:

Helfen Sie durch Ihre Arbeit die gewaltige Menge der französischen Briefe aus unsern Buchläden verdringen, und wünschen Sie, dass der Herr Professor May noch bey seinem Vorhaben bleiben mag, eine Sammlung von guten deutschen Briefen herauszugeben, damit wir auch in dieser Art den Ausländern etwas entgegen zu setzen haben, und den Vorwurf nicht länger leiden dürfen, dass wir lieber elende französische Briefe, als schöne deutsche schreiben wollen.[22]

(Please try to push the tremendous number of French letters out of our bookstores through your work and hope that Professor May will stay with his idea to publish a collection of good German letters so we will be able to show foreigners something good, and that we will not have to take the accusation that we would write bad French letters rather than good German letters.)

May opens his book on a very positive note: "*Wir leben in den beglückten Zeiten, da alle Wissenschaften und Künste sich zum Gipfel der Vollkommenheit schwingen.*"[23] (We live in very blessed times where all sciences and arts develop to the climax of perfection.) This is in contrast to the anecdote that Nickisch relates about Gellert's feelings on the development of mankind when talking to the King of Prussia.

> King: *Es ist etwas Verteufeltes. Sie bringen mir ganze Bogen, und ich verstehe nichts davon.*
>
> Gellert: *Wenn es Ihro Majestät nicht ändern können, so kann ichs noch weniger. Ich kann nur rathen, o sie befehlen.*[24]
>
> (King: It is devilish. They bring me whole sheets, and I don't understand a thing.
>
> Gellert: If your majesty cannot change things, I can do it even less. I can only give advice where you can give orders.)

This answer indicates resignation and little hope for improvement on a broad scale.

While May insists that he bases his discussion of theory on Gellert's principles, there are some striking differences in the approaches of the two men. Gellert wants to improve the quality of all letters; May is mostly interested in the improvement of business letters. He pleads with his audience and appeals to their pride when he says:

Herr Gellert hat uns vollkommene Muster in der freundschaftlichen Art geliefert. . . . Sollen denn die Kaufleute allein den alten gezwungenen Calzley Stil beybehalten? Haben wir keinen anteil an einer angenehmen, geläuterten Schreibart?[25]

(Mr. Gellert has given us perfect examples of the friendship letters. . . . Are the merchants the only ones to continue with the old forced Chancelery? Do style we not have a part in a pleasant, revised writing style?)

Based on this, one could assume that everybody, except merchants, was writing according to Gellert's rules; this of course is not the case.

Separate Treatment of Business Letters

Since May separates business letters from other letters, he feels compelled to justify this separate treatment. He does that in two ways. He gives a philosophical and a practical justification.

Einige haben den Nutzen, und andere das Vergnügen der Menschen zum Endzweck. Die erstere verdienen ohnstreitig mehr Achtung und mehr Fleiss, als die letztere; diese sind ohne jene ein todter Körper, der ohne das Nutzbare unwirksam ist.[26]

(The purpose of some is the usefulness for people, the purpose of others is the pleasure of people. The first, without question, deserves more than the second. Those are a dead body without the first, which is ineffective without the useful.)

May maintains that philosophy, art, poetry, pleasure are only possible after the necessities of life have been secured. People who have no livelihood do not and cannot enjoy the arts and the muses. May does not just put the useful and the pleasant on an equal level but he puts the useful as a prerequisite of the pleasant in the first place.

International Trade

Trade, according to May, is the soul of states; it helps all people, the high as well as the low. Because of trade, faraway countries were discovered. Trade furthers knowledge and creates wealth. May is not concerned with retail communications, but with trade that connects distant parts of the world. This global trade he calls the *vornehmste Handel*, the most noble trade. This point is emphasized throughout his letters. The writer communicates with shippers and merchants in Hamburg, London, Petersburg, Lisbon, Brussels.

To guarantee that trade relationships between distant cities and partners are successful, letters have to be written. Letters have to make sure that the merchant gets the ordered goods, that goods are shipped on time, that payment is made promptly.

Principles of Style

Out of these practical considerations arise the principles that May feels are most important. A letter has to be *deutlich* (clear), *nützlich* (useful), *natürlich* (natural), and *deutsch* (in good German).

A comparison with Gellert shows the different orientation clearly. Gellert emphasizes the stylistic element of the *Natürliche* (the natural) the most. In his discussion he refers to it 56 times. This is followed in importance by the *Schöne* (the beautiful), which is used 40 times. Next is the *Lebhafte* (vivid) used 20 times, and the *Deutliche* (clear) used 15 times.[26]

1. Clarity. For May the most important element of a letter is that it is *deutlich* and *erständlich* (clear and understandable). He refers to this characteristic 12 times.

Die Briefe müssen verstädlich seyn; ein jeder Punkt muss in gehöriger Ordnung vorgetragen, und alles dasjenige vermieden werden, was zu einem Missverständnis Anlass geben kann. Ein jeder weiss es, wie viel an der Deutlichkeit in dem Kaufmännischen Briefwechsel gelegen ist.[28]

(The letters have to be understandable; each point has to be presented in proper order, and all those things have to be avoided which can cause misunderstanding. Everybody knows how important clarity is in business correspondence.)

A letter has to be *nützlich* (useful); this is referred to eight times. "*Da die Handlungswissenschaft demmenschlichen Geschlecht darauf verwendet, das Angenehme mit dem Nutzbaren zu verbinden.*"[29] (Since trade is so useful for mankind it simply demands that one spend more effort to connect the pleasant with the useful.)

2. Elimination of Foreign Elements. The request for a natural style is made four times; the same emphasis can be found in the discussion of negative elements of style. For Gellert the unnatural is the worst. This is followed by the forced or unclear style. May sees the worst offense in a *undeutliche und unverständliche und verwirrte* letter, all meaning that the message is not clear.

The second offense in May's eyes is the use of foreign words. He insists on the use of German for two reasons. The first one is national pride. Germans should use their own language and get away from imitating others.

Wir Müssen uns unsere Muttersprache sehr arm vorstellen, da wir ihr mit ausländischen Brocken zu Hülfe zukommen suchen. Wir wollen sie verschönern; wir machen sie statt dessen eckelhaft und unverständlich. . . . Sie ist an sich reich und schön genug, wenn man sie nur gehörig kennet.[30]

(We must think our mother tongue to be very poor since we try to improve it with foreign phrases. We want to beautify it; instead we make it disgusting and obscure. It is rich and beautiful enough if only one knows it well enough.)

The second reason for rejecting foreign words is the fact that most merchants do not understand French and Latin. Therefore a letter using foreign words violates the most important principle: clarity.

Und was sollen ferner die fremden und gar römischen Wörter, das Genus vitae, Consilia, Consiliis inhaeriren, in einem Handels Briefe thun? Können sich nicht unter zehn Handelsleuten neune finden, die so viel Latein nicht gelernt haben, diese Ausdrücke zu verstehen. Müssen sie nicht rathen? Und wie leicht kann man alsdann einen falschen Sinn herausbringen?[31]

(And furthermore what is the purpose of all the foreign Roman words, the Genus vitae, Consilia, Consiliis inhaeriren, in a business letter? Could it not be that out of ten businessmen nine have not learned enough Latin to understand these terms? Would they not have to guess? And how easily could one read the wrong meaning.)

In his insistence on using German, May is much stronger than Gellert. Gellert requires good German too, but he discusses a number of French and Latin letters assuming that the educated person was fluent in at least one foreign language. May is more practical in his orientation. He gives a detailed list of foreign words and their German equivalents in an attempt to prove that all those foreign words do have German counterparts and are not necessary.

It is interesting to note that many of these words have been Germanicized over the last 200 years. Words like *abstrahieren, addressieren, acceptieren, difference* have been completely assimilated into the German language. A number of the words on May's list are at present used in the *Beamtendeutsch*, the German of the bureaucrats, which is the modern equivalent of the *Kanzleistil* of May's time. Now—like then—most people, even educated ones, have difficulties understanding the exact meaning of these words and phrases.

May also turns against the German disease of using titles. *"Übertriebene Title und Ehrenwörter können der menschlichen Gesellschaft wenig nützen, und in Handlungsgeschäften sind sie vollends überflüssig."*[32] (Exaggerated or honorific titles are of little use to mankind; in business they are even more superfluous.) Titles complicate communications, but May has to admit that a basic knowledge of titles and their correct use is important in his time. It has taken Germans another 200 years to rid themselves of the overuse of titles. Even today titles are more important in Germany than in many other countries.

3. Conversational German. Like Gellert, May insists that a good letter have the qualities of a good conversation. *"Wir haben keine andre Regel, als diese: So zu schreiben, wie man spricht. Geschieht dieses, so wird ein Brief natürlich schön, und folglich gut seyn."*[33] (We have no other rule but this: Write as you talk. If this is the case, a letter will be naturally beautiful and consequently good.) His interpretation of this principle is the same as Gellert's; the letter resembles the conversation of educated people. But again, this principle is

the same as Gellert's; the letter resembles the conversation of educated people. But again, this principle is adapted more to May's special audience. Since a letter is a conversation between people who are far apart and who conduct important business, the conversation has to be clear, and sentences have to be concise.

4. Organization. May discusses the organization of letters in greater detail than Gellert. To write well, he maintains, the writer has to first organize his thoughts. This, of course helps clarity, but there are some other pragmatic considerations too. If the writer does not organize his thoughts at the beginning, a letter may have to go through several revisions. This takes time and costs money, a violation against the *nützliche*, the useful. To reduce the rewriting, sentences should be concise, and ideas should logically follow each other. Complex and long sentences take more preparation and are therefore more time consuming.

Dieser augedehnte Stil führet noch eine andere Beschwerlichkeit mit sich. Ein solcher Brief kann unmöglich ohne vorherigen Aufsatz gut geschrieben werden. Ferner weiss man, dass es auf einer Schreibstube, wo 4, 5. bis 10, 12. Personen arbeiten, nicht immer stille seyn kann.[34]

(This extended style carries with it another difficulty. It is impossible to write such a letter without a prior draft. Furthermore, one knows that it cannot always be quiet in a writing room where 4, 5, up to 10, 12 people are working.)

5. Beginnings and Endings. May also addresses the beginning and ending of letters. While he advises readers to put the important points in a letter first, he does note exceptions. "*Es ist. . . . Nicht undienlich, wenn man ein betrübter Bote seyn muss, dass man gewisse Nachrichten vorher gehen lasse.*"[35] (It is not unwise, if one has to be the messenger of bad news, to put certain other news first.)

May feels that a buffer is helpful. This shows insight into the psychological impact of negative messages and shows his concern for analysis of the situation and adaptation to specific circumstances.

Since merchants need records of agreements, orders, etc., references to dates of letters are important. May admits the need for the practices; it helps clarity and is useful, but he definitely turns against a set pattern for beginnings of letters. He maintains that his example letters in the second part of the book will provide a number of possibilities and writers should strive to vary the openings of letters.

6. Tone. Gellert gives examples of letters between friends. May's letters are messages between strangers, or people who have known each other for a short time, or people who are friends and at the same time have business relationships. The tone of a letter depends on the special relationship of the persons involved, but May insists that business letters can combine business and friendship. This of course ties them to Gellert's letters.

Man urtheilet falsch, wenn man glaubt, dass sich die Empfindungen der Freundschaft in die Briefe der Handelsleute nicht schicken. . . . Ausdrücke, welche die Sprache einer zärtlichen Freunschaft reden, sind allemal angenehm. . . . Und sollten Menschen, die. . . . würklich gute Freunde geworden sind, die Empfindungen einer Freundschaft, die sich nach und nach von selbst errichtet, deswegen nicht ausdrücken dürfen, weil sie Handelsleute sind?[36]

(One judges wrongly if one believes that the feelings of friendship are inappropriate in letters of business people. . . . Expressions which talk the language of an affectionate friendship are always welcome. . . . And should people, who have become really good friends, not be allowed to express the feelings of friendship which gradually grows by itself just because they are business-people?)

Language and Trade

In order to write good examples of business letters, the writer has to have a solid foundation in the art of language and in trade. May agrees with Gellert that the basic principles for writing are the same for all letters; differences are differences in emphasis and in situations. People with pure literary backgrounds, May maintains, do not know enough about trade to write effective business letters. They are missing the particulars of business situations. Merchants, on the other hand, he argues, know their business, but they do not have the background in the art of language; they do not have a solid understanding of the theoretical foundation of business letters or good letters in general. In addition, they do not have the time to reflect on the language they use.

Ein jeder ist nicht aufgelegt, mit gehöriger Aufmerksamkeit, gut geschriebene Schriften zu lesen. . . . Die mehrsten Kaufleute sind überdies theils mit nöthigen, theils mit unnöthigen Geschäften überhäuft.[37]

(Not everyone is in the mood to read well composed writings that were put together with proper care. . . . Furthermore, most merchants are overburdened partly with necessary, partly with unnecessary affairs.)

To develop the theory and the examples for business letters takes a person who understands both the art of language and the business, and May considers himself to be well educated in both areas. He hopes that other merchants will agree that his examples are better than those of the old school and imitate his style and his letters.

Rejection of Classifications

Both authors reject any classification of letters into groups like good news, bad news, persuasive letters, etc. A set classification could of course easily lead to patterns or formulas again, and writers might again, like in the *stylus curiae*, take the patterns and simply fill in the particulars. The basic principles of the new approach might easily get lost. May turns against classifications of letters for one additional reason. Most letters combine a number of messages, a division into good and bad news letters would therefore be simplistic and

unnatural, May argues. In his discussion May concentrates mostly on those points that are particularly important for business. The principles that are equally important for business letters and letters in general and where he fully agrees with Gellert, are not developed in detail. Those that are crucial in business, like clarity, he discusses in great detail. May's analysis and improvement of weak letters in the first part of the book shows a mastery of the German language similar to that of Gellert.

Summary

May's book, *Versuch in Handlungsbriefen*, is the first text on business communications utilizing the new theoretical approach which had been developed by Gellert. Gellert discusses stylistic principles and demonstrates those principles in examples of friendship letters. His approach is a definite break with the traditional *stylus curiae*.

May takes Gellert's theory and adapts it to business. This process changes the emphasis of some of the stylistic principles. For Gellert the most important characteristics of a letter are the conversational and natural tone. For May the most important characteristic is clarity. The natural and conversational elements have to serve the clarity, they are not there for their own sake.

The one area where May's letter are much stronger than Gellert's is content. As pointed out above, Gellert's letters seem to lack content. In May's letters the content is important. The letters are written for a purpose—the linen will not arrive till spring; a ship sank in the English Channel; the earthquake in Lisbon destroyed warehouses and goods. Those events affect the livelihood of the merchant, his customers and creditors. May's book went through four editions in nine years. This is some indication that merchants were willing to try the approach based on Gellert's principles.

May's Exemplary Letters

Two sections conclude the May work: a compendium of 125 letters and nine sections generally entitled *Grössere Kaufmännische Aufsätze*, or *Extended Commercial Essays*. Our analysis will be fivefold: (1) May 's pedagogical technique; (2) style within the letters; (3) topics covered; (4) structure and form; and (5) a critique of May's method.

Pedagogical Method

The word *loose* would describe May's approach. But that term is more a criticism and will be detailed later. Here we report on pedagogical technique.

Most of the 125 letters stand by themselves—devoid of headnotes, sidenotes, preamble, or concluding comments. The letters stand in isolation,

the reader supplying personal inferences as to what should have been learned. For example, letter 38:

> I have received the bill of lading sent via the ship Danglade for containers numbered 10, 11, and 12. . . .
>
> A messenger from Bologna brought the distressing news that an English warship forced the Danglade ashore under full sail. . . .
>
> At the departure of the messenger we were concerned and busy. . . .
>
> I remain with all sincerity. . . .

Thus what is to be learned is left up to the reader: whether to adapt the material situation or copy verbatum.

A second approach is more thoughtful, namely, a sequential illustration built on a single theme, or problem. The usual method is a trilogy, the first letter raising an issue, the second responding, and the third answering the second. No indication is ever given as to pedagogical intent, only the titles suggest an answer is to be given: *Antwort auf den Zweiten Brief*, or *Antwort auf den dritten Brief*.

An interesting scenario in the 125 letter sequence is a four part progression: from an initial three letters to a fourth and final response—six months later—which answered queries raised in the first letter.

May is more useful as a pedagogue in Part II of his illustrative section translated as Extended Commercial Essays. We feel he uses the case method in the following:

> GUTACHTEN ODER PARERE
>
> 1. History of the case—3 page statement
> 2. Additional material—5 sections
> 3. Series of questions to be answered before final decision can be made—3 questions
> 4. Responses to three questions bearing on the issue of the litigation—3 optional responses
> 5. Optional opinions on the preceding data—4 optional responses a writer might use.

A similar logical chronology of another case progresses in this manner:

> VERLAUF DER SACHE, ODER SPECIES FACTI
>
> 1. History, facts of the case
> 2. Series of possible advisory statements
> 3. Letter responding to the two previous discussions

Both of the preceding examples are as barren as presented; the reader, again, inferring what goal is to be attained.

Third, May is silent on mechanics of a letter, but our analysis suggests that the following mechanical methods are used to move ideas along.

- Numbered paragraphs are indented to set apart options
- Quotations from previous letters or sources are either indicated in a different type script or indented

- Adverbs used—firstly, secondly—to separate thoughts in a long series
- Occasional use of the P.S. to suggest appended thought

Fourth, languages other than German are put into parentheses to further explain the German concept or business term, as for example, *conossement* for *Verladungsschein*; *Recambio* for *Rückwechsel*; *Dispacheur*; *Parere* for *Gutdünken*; *Leccagie* for *Ausgeleckte*. An inference is that May desired German to be the language of business, but realized that some foreign terms had to be used—they were more familiar. The preceding may contradict his attitude of merchants not knowing French or Latin, yet he played it semantically safe by including both the German and the foreign international term to ensure understanding.

Thus over two hundred years later, our hindsight suggests that May's pedagogical style left readers to shift for themselves; editorial comments are absent.

Style of Letters

There are major differences between business letter writing of the early 18th century and stylistic techniques common today. Whether all of May's stylistic methods were prevalent we cannot determine. Yet, the tone and approach for his day is evident.

Few formal business letters today would include many references to God, or the Deity in any form. The following suggest the almost homiletical pleadings that God oversee all aspects of business, the usual method being to insert, in mid thought, statements as the following.

Der Schiffer gehet mit erstem günstigen Wind ab. Nach seiner, Gott gebe, glücklichen Ankunft gelieben Sie den Empfang dieser Güter zu besorgen, und des Herrn—Willen damit zu vollziehen.[39]	(The ship departs with the first favorable wind. After the happy arrival, God willing, please take care of the receipt of the goods, executing there-with the will of Mr. ———.)

The following example has close similarity to the prayer, most appropriate because the letter writer is looking forward to the next year.

Für Ihren freundschaftlichen Wunch zu dem God lob! Der Höchste erfülle ihn! Er überschütte Sie, und was Ihnen zugerhöret, mit seinem reichesten Seegen, und lasse alle Ihre Unternehmungen glücklich seyn.[40]	(For your friendly wish praise to God. May the Almighty fulfill it. May He shower you and what you possess with His richest blessing, letting all your undertaking be blessed.)

God is also implored to watch over those who travel by sea, particularly sailors and ships about to go under sail.

Er gehet heute noch unter Seegel. Der Wind ist ihm sehr günstig. Der Höchste geleite Ihn![41]	(He goes today under sail. The wind is very favorable to him. May the Highest guide him.)

As a result of the Lisbon disaster,[42] May has the writer attempt to relate the happening to a higher power because so many merchants, inhabitants, and ships were affected.

Dies sind Schläge, welche unmittelbar von der Hand des Allmächtigen kommen; Wir müssen die Ruthe küssen, ihn als Vater verehren, und jenen Unglücklichen, als unseren Mitbürgern, unser Mitleiden schenken.[43]

(These are blows which come directly from the hand of the All-Powerful. We must kiss the whip, honor Him as Father and give every unfortunate our compassion as our fellow-citizen.)

Not unusual, or unexpected is the use of the deity in the opening paragraph or final close of a letter.

- Leben Sie Wohl. Gott Bewahre uns für allen widrigen Zufällen.
- Gesund, Gott lob!
- Man befürchtet vieles; das Beste müssen wir hoffen. Der Höchste bewahre einen jeden für ferneren Unglücksfällen!

(Farewell. God keep us from all adverse accidents.)
(Health to you, praise God.)
(One fears much; we must hope for the best. May the Almighty preserve everyone from future accidents.)

Thus the Almighty—in the Christian sense—pervades much business writing: to help, assist, watch over. The depth of the request is hard to determine, or whether the letter writer is simply to follow an ccepted formula.

Dependence on personal friendships is a second consistent convention. One infers that the entrée to business relationships could be speeded up, that the *ethos* of the letter writer was enhanced through knowing the right people. Such an implied relationship is found in the introductory or concluding remarks: carrying a distinguished family name; having a father who was previously involved in business dealings; being the friend of another businessman with whom the reader transacted business. Thus a mutually known friend or the right family name suggested acceptability for a business relationship.

An outgrowth of this strong filial and personal friendship method is a conversational mode of writing. Here we mean the occasional use of an imaginary dialogue between writer and reader: "All your creditors will presumably have the same luck? Yes, Yes! You said so yourself. With Mr. Bartels you have had a misunderstanding. . . . But enough said.[44] Occasionally May, by implication, suggests that the interjection "oh heavens" or incomplete sentences have a place in business writing, perhaps to break up the formal progression of ideas.

Interestingly, the style of negative letters is formal, but with short sentences. Clipped, staccato writing would characterize the several negative letters included as examples, or in this 18th letter:

> "You promised me 500 German Marks, and still the bill is not paid. You were traveling. Your dear wife, at least, answered me. She asked for eight more days, and promised to send the money. The time has gone and still no money. Is this right? I will wait no longer."[45]

Yet, no matter how negative, as in the above example, politeness to all persons continues. The writer, above, is angry, yet is courteous to the wife. We found no examples of disrespect toward persons regardless of the severity of the tone. People are treated with respect, indeed, even affection.

While the preceding may lead one to conclude that the tone of 18th Century German letters is casual, this is not the case. There are only flashes of informality. May's letters are humorless. He may argue for the informal, natural style, but there is no humor. Formality is the norm.

The final genre of the text, Extended Commercial Essays, are just that: long, circuitous legalese, written in the stereotyped language of the legal world. May's intent—he does not say so—is to separate the business letter from the more formal legal statement. Droll, dull, and repetitious characterize the Essay section. Humor is absent. Formality and circumlocutions abound.

Personal, homey experiences are frequently mixed in with the usual topics of 'business letters. The Lisbon earthquake event is ubiquitous. Obviously May was well informed, for he puts into several letters examples written from different points of view. Some tell the story second-hand; others third-hand; ultimately telling the story in the words of a merchant who escaped into the hills.

Thus the naturalness of May is to suggest the inclusion of filial comments, a conversational style at times, along with underlying politeness. He only partly succeeds—at least by standards of today.

Letter Topics

A letter transmits history. It is a mirror of the times recorded in personal terms. Hence, to know the business concerns of the day, a fruitful source for a view of the early 1700's, is to survey subjects in May's illustrative letters.

1. Maritime trade. We were consistently surprised at the international breadth of commerce, assuming May's examples would only be within his country. But much business was transacted outside Germany. Cities and countries mentioned included Paris, Bologna, London, America, Lisbon, Madrid, Frankfurt, Hull, and Lübeck. Surely the German cities predominate, and the German rivers on which goods moved, but the international flavor of the letters is surprising.

Indeed, it is interesting to speculate whether this emphasis on international trade—*vornehmste Handel*—as May calls it, is the earliest work dealing with style of writing for international commerce. If it is, May deserves credit for the first work that seeks a common style of communication between the major trading countries of the world.

2. Ships. These means of conveyance are not really themes, yet the ships seem to be *the* main means for transport of goods. And of course the ships are

not referred to in feminine terms, but with masculine sounding names as Donglade; Christian Roose; or Schutt. Their arrivals and departures must have been major happenings, admitting to the vicissitudes of the sea. Many letters begin with an almost exclamatory statement that *the* ship has arrived, safely. Conversely, a tag line on letters is the fervent hope that God will give good and safe passage to the ship.

Again the emphasis is upon ocean-going ships and not the simple river barges which plied the canals and channels of Germany. This international thrust would be in keeping with May's world view of trade and commerce.

3. Wind. The weather occupies more than an afterthought: it is the propellant for international trade. The ship will leave on the wind, or similar phrases punctuate the letter. Rough weather, treacherous storms bedevil the safe arrival of goods. There is no doubt that the wind or the lack of it occasioned many inquiries as to the potential arrival dates for goods.

4. Messengers. Although Germany had a rudimentary postal system by early 1700, May's letters suggest that much business correspondence was carried by private couriers. Captains of ships had the varied roles of guiding the ship, carrying business letters to another merchant along with the cargo, and then returning with funds in payment for the goods transported.

Private persons were no less used, even to sending an employee as the company messenger. No doubt some messengers absconded with funds in such a loosely run system.

5. Events. The Lisbon earthquake of 1775 has been mentioned. Questions were also raised as to war between England and France, disasters at sea, specifically the gunboats of certain nations. Surprisingly, not one letter mentions any political issues.

6. Specific business concerns. A modern reader will remark that things have not changed much in the last 200 years as to the content of business letters. Indeed, most of the following examples in May are reflected in recent business communication texts.

- Price of material
- List of goods sent
- Approximate arrival date of goods sent
- Differences between invoice and goods received
- Increase in the cost of goods

- Credit policies
- Interest charges
- Money due on late payments
- Insurance issues
- Which port, wharf on which to unload

- Request for bill of lading

- Request for payment
- Rate of exchange
- Opportunity to buy goods cheaper elsewhere
- Extension of payments

- Funds deposited into bank account for future orders
- Evaluation of credit standing
- Receipt of payment
- Threat of lawsuit
- Payment in arrears

May at no time puts the above topics and themes into some kind of letter category, i.e., each letter has no heading other than the number of the letter illustrated. Consequently a sales letter is similar to a request letter, of any type.

From the previous sections of this paper the reason is clear: May wished to avoid categorization; he wished a natural style which erased any vestige of strict forms that business writers, in lock step, would follow in all instances. Sadly, a lack of topic identification makes it hard for readers to discover any specific help on themes.

7. Extended essays. Without a semantic pause May moves from his 125 letters to his Extended Commercial Letters. This brief section, we presume, may have been either for the professional scribe or notary. We doubt that the complexities of the German syntax could have been handled by the average merchant. One of the few salutation examples in the text begins the section with *Hochedlgebohrner, Hockgelahrter Herr Doctor*, suggesting the turgid style to follow.

a. *Unterrichte, oder Insturcctiones.* Lessons or instructions is primarily a claim case, discussed chronologically. Two letters, a discussion of the data, and a concluding lesson based thereon make up the section.

b. *Gutachten oder Parere.* Advice or legal opinions has these parts of a rudimentary case: the 128th letter; history of the affair; the answer or judgment; the 129th letter; history of the affair; additional material; possible questions; possible answers to the questions; and optional judgment statements.

c. *Bittschriften.* Petitions include the 130th letter; a petition; and a proposal on the issue.

d. *Ansuchung um ein Subsidial, oder Gerichtliches Vorschreiben.* Request for a subsidy or judicial decision.

e. *Vollmachten*, or Power of Attorney discussion. Includes the 131st letter; an answer to the previous letter; and a power of attorney statement regarding the previous issue.

f. *Beträge, oder Contracte.* Business contracts include an exemplary business contract highly legal in tone; a specific business contract between

two people; a service contract; a dissolution contract; an employee contract; and a teaching contract.

g. *Obligationen, oder Schuldverschreibungen.* Promissory notes or debt statements have two parts: an example of a loan on goods; required collateral on a bond; and more simple loan instruments.

h. *Cesziones, oder Ueberträge.* Endorsement examples included are those of an inheritance share and endorsement of a debt or claim.

i. *Mortifications oder Tilgungs Schein eines verlohren Documents.* Example of a certification statement applicable to the loss of documents.

j. *Generale Quittung für einen Failliten.* May concludes with a brief statement relevant to general receipts.

By way of summary for the above examples, May seeks to illustrate the complexity of writing for the legal world. Definitely, his admiration for a natural style does not apply to legal language.

Structure, Form

Idea progression in May's letters varies little. Whereas today we discuss cause to effect; topical; chronological; inductive; deductive; problem-solution; and other methods of organization, May's letter begin, and progress with monotonous similarity. "I was pleased to hear in your dear letter of the 5th of October . . ."; "I've received two of your notes of the 11th and 15th"; "Your two letters of the 9th and 14th with 1,000£ has just been received." Thus opening paragraphs are touchstones to some previous event in time. It is the dominant way May begins a letter.

Apologies run a close second for opening paragraphs: either for not writing or for trespassing into the time of the reader.

Other prefatory remarks—for either positive or negative letters—include the hope of a continued friendship; mild reprimands for not writing; or receipt of funds for payment of goods delivered. Frequently, the safe arrival of the transport ship occupies the initial position in a positive letter.

The body of the letter is structured most often in chronological form. Most of the 125 letters progress in this manner. Time is constantly before the reader, from initial sentence, through a chronological retelling of events in the body, to the final close, to which we shall now turn.

Endings are uniformly polite and warm, with the usual variations: "Your willing servant"; the familiar "Leben Sie Wohl" or "Farewell"; "I acknowledge your friendship and promise to remain with all sincerity . . . "; "I seek to continue our business relationship"; "Remember me in your thoughts"; and others similar in nature. Not unusual was the prayerful benediction; especially after receiving bad news:

Der Höchste bewahre Sie vor allen schmerzhaften Zufällen! Er erhalte Sie	(The Almighty preserve you from all painful accidents. May he keep you in

bis in das späteste Alter bey unverrücktem Wohlseyn! Ich fühle, wie empfindlich es ist, dasjenige zu verlieren, was man liebet. Spät, sehr spät müsse Sie die Traurigkeit drücken die ich jetzt empfinde—Ich habe die Ehre zu seyn....[46]

sane good health until the end of time. I know how sensitive it is, to lose the one that one loves. Late, very late will you squelch the sadness that I now feel ... I have the honor to be....)

It is difficult to note any structural change between positive and negative letters, or for that matter in any of May's letters. One should: (1) refer to a previous date; (2) state a pleasantry; (3) arrange the subject chronologically; and (4) conclude with a reaffirmation of friendship.

Inconsistency describes the format of either a positive or negative letter. May is so nonprescriptive that readers must guess as to procedure, particularly when one sharp letter immediately begins in the negative:

Aus einliegenden Auszug Ihrer laufenden Rechnung werden Sie ersehen, dasz Sie mir seit 1754. und also schon 2. Jahre 545. Rthlr. schuldig sind. Meine Umstände erlauben mir nich länger zu warten; ich bitte Sie daher, mir auf das eheste zu melden, ob wir hierin übereinstimmen, und auf recht befinden mir die Gelder einzusenden, damit ich diesen Post in meinen Büchern tilgen kann.[47]

(You will see from the summary of your current bill that since 1754, and still two years later, you owe 545 Rthlr's. My circumstances do not permit me to wait any longer; therefore, I ask you to remit at the earliest time, and send the money that I may cancel this request in my books.)

The preceding lacks a buffer, moves directly to the issue. Other illustrative letters occasionally buffer the news with a reference to a previous date, or some other phatic communication. Readers had a choice.

Positive letters, for the most part, state the good news early and then move to remaining material. May's approach is no different than what we suggest today in business communication texts.

Critique of May

Simply for contrast we will compare May's handling of business letters with that of a predecessor: August Bohse's *Gründliche Einleitung zu Teutschen Briefen*, 1706.[48] From the following matrix one can then arrive at some conclusions.

Bohse (1705)	*May (1775)*
• Introductory comments to all the illustrated letters	• Omitted
• Letters into categories, as: Gebühr Briefe Geschäfts Briefe Anwebungs Schreiben Benachrichtungs Schreiben	• No titles or categories given

Bericht Schreiben, and others . . . ● Titles of address, as for: Dr. and Prof. of law Dr. of laws without Prof. Prof. of philosophy King of Sweden Married countess Dancing master Lieutenant, and over 200 other titles of address . . .	● None; clearly May attempts to remove himself from the artificiality of these hierarchies of address
● Salutations and complimentary close	● Appears in three of 125 letters
● Intended reader of letter	● Omitted
● Dates; place of origin of the letter	● Omitted
● Grammar; punctuation; orthography discussion	● Omitted
● Essay preceding each class of letter	● Absent
● Legal letters	● Special section illustrating nine kinds of legal writing
● Latin salutations	● None
● Index to letters	● Absent
● Rules for writing letters	● None

While the Bohse work goes beyond business communication, it is obvious that May is intentionally less prescriptive. He wishes to disregard the minute classifications, the innumerable rules, the pedantic titles which presumed a commonality for all letters. No doubt he would have found galling the 200 salutations and forms of address of his predecessor Bohse. Too, he had little use for the pedantic use of Latin and French as symbols of writers who wished to be impressive in style, again proposed by Bohse. Artificial rules are absent in May.

As an organized presentation, the May work fails. We have said that his loose structure puts the burden of learning entirely on the reader. If his latter two-thirds of the work were to have been a compendium for reference, it fails. So too does his handling of letter content. Needless repetition, close similarity in style, themes, and structure pervade his examples. Many letters could have been omitted.

While the preceding appears negative in tone, it reflects our personal demand for clarity in idea progression. May's response might be that naturalness in style is just that: the reader must have freedom to choose any style, any idea progression which would resemble the flow of oral discourse, complete with its untidy sentence structure and unclear main points. Eventually the idea would be clear, though circuitous.

In leaving much unsaid in the letter section, the bridge is weak between theory and practice. The reader must mentally rehearse the background and apply the tenets of that background to the 125 letters: adding, subtracting, and omitting at one's own discretion. Much is unsaid. The reader is much—alone.

Conclusions

In conclusion, May's work represents a significant contribution to the history of German business communication. In our century we may be unhappy with his approach, but the success of his text suggests a desire by German business to follow a less dogmatic style and less prescriptiveness:

- His work is the first to apply good taste (clarity, naturalness) to the German business letter writer. He may have borrowed from his predecessor Gellert, but he made the practical leap to the world of commerce.
- He contributes to the further refining of the German language, joining scholars who insisted that the German language possessed the semantic stamina for trade and other business relations.
- He represents the international man, realizing that for clear communication to occur one had to grasp the essential of clarity no matter the country.
- He desired an openness in style, a divorce from the mechanical formats of his predecessors. This freedom thus would result in a more natural and conversational style of business communication.

Finally, what influence he had on removal of the innumerable artificial titles for both the secular and religious world is not unclear: but he did continue that momentum which today is less formidable in business than it was in the 18th century.

Notes

1. Johann Carl May, *Versuch in Handlungs-Briefen, und grösseren Aufsätzen, nach den Gellertschen Regeln. Nebst einer Abhandlung von dem guten Geschmack in Handlungs-Briefen*. (Altona: David Iverson, Kön, priv. Buchhändler), 1765, p. 2.

2. The Papal Curiae of the Middle Ages developed a variety of patterns and formulas to be used in the writing of official letters and documents. Often the formulas were collected in a book which also included a set of rules of good writing. Since this particular style has its origin in the Papal Curiae, the style was referred to as *stylus curiae*.

3. Reinhard M. G. Nickisch, *Die Stilprinzipien in den deutschen Brief-stellern des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 1969, p. 185.

4. Elsewhere, in more detail, is developed the hypothesis that Greek and Roman rhetoric directly influenced *dictamen* or writing of the Medieval and Renaissance world. Succinctly, letters were structured in similar form as oral discourse: exordium; narratio; divisio or partitio; confirmatio; refutatio; and conclusio. Also, letter writers borrowed heavily from the ancient tenets of rhetoric, using primarily inventio, dispositio, and lexis of style. See Herbert W. Hildebrandt, "Greek and Roman Rhetoric's Influence on Business and Legal Communication in the Medieval and Renaissance World." *Working Paper No. 127*, (University of Michigan, 1980).

5. Nickisch, *Stilprinzipien*, p. 80.

6. Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, *Briefe, nebst einer praktischen Abhandlung von dem guten Geschmacke in Briefen*. (Leipzig: Johann Wendler), 1751, reprinted by Carl Ernst Poeschel Verlag, Stuttgart, 1971, p. 49ff.

7. Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, *Gedanken von einem guten deutschen Briefe, an den Herrn F.H. v. W., Belustigungen des Verstandes und des Witzes*. (Leipzig: Bernard Christoph Breitkops), 1742, reprinted by Carl Ernst Poeschel Verlag, Stuttgart, 1971, p. 178.

8. Gellert, *Briefe* . . ., p. 3.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 285, letter 70.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 213, letter 33.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 201, letter 28.

21. Nickisch, *Stilprinzipien*, Anhang, p. 11.

22. Gellert, *Gedanken von einem Briefe*, p. 189.

23. May, p. 1.

24. Nickisch, *Nachwort* in reprints of Gellert's work, p. 3.

25. May, p. 3.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

27. Nickisch, *Stilprinzipien*, p. 173.

28. May, p. 29.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

42. The city of Lisbon suffered a severe earthquake on November 1, 1775. On that date most of the city was destroyed, followed by a tidal wave which wrecked the harbor, followed by a severe fire. Over 30,000 people died. Repeated references to this event occur in May's letters, attesting to the imprint the event had on European and Asian business.

43. May, p. 203.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 216-17.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

48. August Bohse, genannt Talender, *Gründliche/Einleitung/zu Teutschen/Briefen/ Nach den Haupt Reguln der/teutschen Sprache eröffnet/und allen Liebhabern eines teutschen Con-/cepts, solderlich aber/Denen zum Nutzen abgefasset/So des Autoris Collegia in/ diesem nöthigem Studio frequentiren/Auch nach gegeben richtigen Lehr, Sagen/ mit einer/ Jetzt Üblichen Titvlatvr und allerhand/ Brief Mustern erläutert/Von./ Talandern./* (Bey Ernest Clavde Bailliar), 1706, reprinted by Scriptor Verlag, 1974.

Business Writing in America in the Nineteenth Century

George H. Douglas
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

It is one of the popular myths of present teachers of business writing that the businessman of a hundred years ago was a terrible writer, that he filled his letters and reports with fustian, cast-iron locutions, and rodomontade. Is this true? Well, the answer is far from being simple, and any answer will have to be full of qualifications and exceptions. In general, business writing did tend to be more formal in the nineteenth century than it is today, but the conditions of business and social life were changing so fast in the nineteenth century that almost any generalization leaves itself open to attack from all quarters.

Below is what might be called a typical business letter from the 1830's written by DeWitt Clinton, he of steamboat fame, once an aspirant to the presidency, once governor of New York. The letter deals with one of Clinton's pet projects, the building of a railroad along the Delaware River in New York State:

December 3, 1831

My much Respected Friend:[1] When I had the pleasure to meet you at your house, you promised to procure for me the level of the summit of the route proposed for the railroad between your place and the Susquehanna River, and also the distance between the two rivers. I hope that you will be able to fulfill your promises, and that you will enclose me the measurements without loss of time.

In a late letter I am told that it is proposed to hold a convention to promote the objects of the road. I hope that Pennsylvania will enlist also in this measure by sending delegates to it. By Pennsylvania I allude to the northern counties, and it would be better that our friends in both States should unite than to adopt two separate conventions for that purpose.

If a convention should be held it would be well to instruct the members of Congress in both States whose constituents are interested, to exert themselves to procure a special appropriation by Congress to make the surveys next Spring. This, in any event, ought to be done.

Most respectfully yours,
DeWitt Clinton

Of course this is a somewhat more formal and courtly English than a businessman would write in the middle of the twentieth century. On the other hand, it is not nearly as pompous or bombastic as letters of this period are often alleged to have been. And there were some merits in the older formal style that have sometimes gone unnoticed. Men of affairs wrote as gentlemen, and they did not gravitate, as the contemporary businessman so often does, toward an impersonal style in which things just happen in some kind of institutionalized vacuum. The businessman of the nineteenth century was not afraid to mention that someone had visited in his house, or that his "friends" were taking a certain kind of action, or that a business venture or company was a true collection of real people doing things—as opposed to an impersonal and silent working of offices and bureaucracies. The nineteenth century businessman did not gravitate naturally toward the passive voice, but rather tended to see the world of business in terms of real action and human drama.

Above all, to understand how the business writing of the nineteenth century differs from that of the twentieth, we must first understand the completely different social and practical environment of business writing, at least in the first three quarters of the century. It was not until after the Civil War that business started to take on its present characteristic as the province of large and bureaucratic organizations. Before the Civil War even the largest of American businesses were run by comparatively small staffs of office workers, sometimes nothing more than the entrepreneur himself and a clerk or office boy. The giant corporation, with office after office, and one specialized white-collar function after another had not yet appeared. And such complexity was doubtless feared and hated by the early entrepreneur, who would have seen his power and authority slipping away into the hands of those who could not and should not be depended on.

One of the oldest and largest American businesses before the Civil War was the E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Co., a firm which had been manufacturing gunpowder on Brandywine Creek near Wilmington, Delaware since shortly after the Revolution. The company was from the beginning a family fifedom, and the du Ponts kept strict control over the company for well over a century. Head of the company in 1850, and for the next 39 years, was Mr. Henry du Pont, who single-handedly ran the business from Wilmington with an office right down by the powder mill. His office staff in this period never exceeded four men and a boy. All of the other du Pont employees were strictly engaged in some part of the manufacturing process. Mr. du Pont sat at a small old-fashioned desk writing with a quill pen. With this quill pen he wrote on the average of six thousand letters a year.[2]

And one must imagine that Mr. du Pont's letters were pretty well written too, for a man who wrote six thousand letters a year would have no time for

frills and flourishes. One can imagine that he must have gotten down to the heart of the matter without much ado. But the real point is that as late as 1880 the du Pont Company, one of the nation's oldest and best established businesses, was strictly and intimately controlled, and centered around the authority of a single individual. Indeed Mr. Henry du Pont did not regard himself as the man in the office at all; he regarded himself as the man who happened to be at the head, but also the body and substance of his company. He lived near the works and was as deeply involved in what went on there as he was in the happenings at the office. The story is told that one night he was awakened from his sleep upon hearing a peculiar whistling noise along the powder line. He routed the foreman out of bed and the two searched for the cause of the difficulty. And it was Mr. du Pont himself who found the source of the trouble, and he was able to prevent an explosion by pouring some water on the right spot form his stovepipe hat.

Men like Henry du Pont were first and foremost not "office executives" in the modern sense of the term. They were men of affairs, to be sure, and this would be reflected not only in their writing but in all of their doings. But, more importantly, they were men of action and men of concrete involvement. They knew their business from top to bottom because they *were* the business from top to bottom. More often than not they were saturated enough in the details of their business that they could give forceful and pungent expression to their thoughts and dealings.

To be sure, the nineteenth century businessman had to assume the patina of a gentleman, and there was always an assumption that the gentleman should possess certain refinements and niceties both in behavior and expression. And there was the lingering belief—for democracy had only recently arisen out of the ashes of the original republic—that the business leader must somehow distance himself from *hoi polloi*. And undoubtedly this patina of gentility sometimes got the rising and aspiring man of commercial affairs into difficulty in that it might attract him toward forms of expression that were not his own and which accordingly did not sit gracefully on his shoulders. On the other hand, the very directness, the crudeness of the age often made the nineteenth century businessman wary of all forms of phony politeness and refinement. In writing, the businessman of the era was just as likely drawn toward directness and even abruptness of language as he was toward prolixity and circumlocution. One cannot help but remember the directness and simplicity of one of Commodore Vanderbilt's letters:

> Gentlemen:
> You have undertaken to cheat me. I will not sue you, for the law takes too long. I will ruin you.
>
> Sincerely yours,
> Cornelius Vanderbilt

Well, the old Commodore was certainly not a gentleman, and he rarely affected gentlemanly airs. And his writing was all the better for it. He might have been able to learn something about politeness, and admittedly he was something of an old curmudgeon, but when he was going directly about his business he didn't have to be taught very much about clarity, simplicity, and directness. And the same is doubtless true of most of the men of his class and day. Such refinements or niceties of language they had were tacked on, mere excrescences, which they themselves would have recognized as cant and humbug.

Still, there are no easy generalizations about businessman writers in the American nineteenth century mainly because conditions of business life were changing so quickly and so radically, and because so much was happening to American prose in general during that period. These more general changes had a great many lasting effects on the way that Americans in all walks of life would express themselves. Indeed it's true, if possible, that changes in language, and in the manner of the written word, were more sweeping and more earthshattering than those we have experienced in the twentieth century. And certainly more rudimentary.

In his book *Patriotic Gore*, Edmund Wilson, one of the nation's foremost literary critics, expressed the opinion that the middle years of the nineteenth century, especially the years around the Civil War, bred a simpler and cleaner style of writing. In a chapter of his book (which dealt mainly with the literature about the Civil War) entitled "The Chastening of American Prose Style," Wilson took on the whole phenomenon from top to bottom. Before the Civil War, he said, America's writers "had a verbose, untidy model in the novels of Walter Scott:—a style that was embroidered, or perhaps better coagulated, clogged, viscous. But a change in American style took place in the middle of the century. "The Plethora of words is reduced; the pace becomes firmer and quicker," especially in the North: the South during the Civil War and after tended to cling to grandoise and imprecise language, perhaps as a cloak for legend and missed opportunity.

In Wilson's mind this new impetus toward a more clean-cut language, a language that was later to flourish in writers like Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce, was connected with the war itself, or at least Northern industry and efficiency. The great northern political leaders, men like Lincoln and Grant, burst forth with a new kind of language for both everyday and ceremonial use that was lucid, precise, terse, and which clearly broke with the windbaggery and inflated eloquence that marred political oratory of the generation just before. Some had suggested that the great clarity and simplicity in writings like those of Lincoln and Grant were due to the fact that they were Westerners, that their language grew out of the habit of homely speech, out of Western humor or drawl. But no, said Wilson, "Grant and Lincoln were

both quick thinkers; no drawl is to be heard in their writings or in the framing of their reported opinions." A wholly new set of social conditions was working in them. Why did Grant and Lincoln write with such concision? "It was undoubtedly the decisiveness with which they had to speak. They had no time in which to waste words. To temporize or deceive was too dangerous. They were obliged to issue orders and to lay down lines of policy that will immediately be understood."[3]

Northern efficiency, perhaps therein lies the answer, perhaps it comes down to a basic shift from a rural to an urban society. The North, during and after the War, became a new nation, a nation of energetic pragmatists and anxious achievers, and naturally this would be reflected in the quality of language and writing.

There were many other things going on at the same time, of course. Undoubtedly the widespread growth and dissemination of the daily newspaper, especially of the penny press in the large cities, had an effect of incalculable importance. The competition among urban newspapers was fierce, but with the appearance on the scene of men like James Gordon Bennett (and later of Pulitzer and Hearst), and the tendency of newspapers to "catch" readers either by clear and lively writing or by treatment of subjects of strong human interest, had the effect of making the general public more disposed to sharp, simple and colorful prose.

All this was partly a matter of sheer technology in that the penny press made it possible for nearly every man or boy old enough to read to have a daily paper placed in his hands. As a magazine of the middle of the nineteenth century declared, "the penny papers reach the very depths of the social state." In Colonial times a newspaper was mainly a compilation of clippings from London papers some months old, or, news items that were deemed "important" by the "respectable" public. But by the middle of the nineteenth century, the newspaper gave up on the centrality of "important" news and instead began to focus on what would draw, what would grip the man on the streetcorner. Such news called for writing that was simple, vivid, colorful, even over-sensational. In any case, no such newspaper would hire to its staff those steeped in bombast and grandiloquence.

The mass-circulation newspapers were, of course, made possible by advances in technology—the rotary press, and later the linotype machine. And in every sphere of life in the nineteenth century writing was being transformed by one or another technological development. The telegraph was invented before the Civil War and had a considerable importance in the conduct of the war itself. The telegraph message, it hardly needs to be said, needed to be brief, clear, and succinct. The wires couldn't be tied up with wasted words, and the code itself was time-consuming to send, so the tendency was to pare everything down to the simplest and most elemental form.

Too, devices like the telegraph, and later the telephone, gave a sense of urgency and rush to things so that their users were bound to a belief in the swiftness of communication. This sense of urgency was reflected again in the public media of communication like the daily press. The press came to take stories off the "hot wire" and made a positive fetish of getting the important wire stories set in print and out in the street as soon as possible. The lightening wire, the rotary press, the spirit of the "extra, extra," latest edition, made the typical American a firm believer in quick and vivid expression in the written word.

We must not, however, jump to the easy conclusion that all of the technological developments of the nineteenth century worked in favor of a more simple and economical prose style. Consider the typewriter, for example. It may have done much to facilitate business correspondence as well as make possible better-looking and more error-free copy. But the typewriter also gave rise to a new flood of paper and the blessings of this were mixed at best.

The volume of correspondence in the rapidly growing corporation in the nineteenth century had really been foreshadowed by the invention of the primitive duplicating devices in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson had been intrigued by the invention of a polygraph machine that enabled a writer's pen to reproduce its movements on another sheet of paper. And by 1845, two decades before the invention of a practical manual typewriter, Samuel F. B. Morse and his partner were sending machine writing long distances electromagnetically. The forerunner of the machine with manual keyboard that we know today was that patented by C. Latham Sholes of Milwaukee in 1868.

Interestingly enough the typewriter was not immediately seen as being a device that would have an application to business. From the first it was assumed that the writing machine would be of advantage to authors and men of letters, perhaps to ministers who wanted to read their sermons or make copies for later distribution. From the beginning it was assumed that the typewriter would have no application in business writing because it was impersonal and standardized. And when it first did get a foothold in business correspondence it was rejected by many people. For example when Sears Roebuck & Co. started using the typewriter for correspondence it received so many complaints from farmers and its catalog buyers that it had to go to the trouble of having a special staff of secretaries who would write business letters by hand for those who were suspicious of the typewritten word.[4]

By the end of the nineteenth century the typewriter had revolutionized the field of business correspondence, and the social ambience of business itself since it now provided employment for females who took over from executives the chore of writing those letters which were no longer thought to need the

hand of individuality, the touch of the head man himself. Indeed, the technological developments of the late nineteenth century entirely obliterated the belief that the business document be unique and personal. In time the nation's schools of penmanship, once considered so vital in the educational equipment of the aspiring businessman, closed their doors and faded into the pages of history.

Another development around this same time reinforced the trend toward impersonality and lack of uniqueness. This was the appearance of carbon paper, for which patents were applied in 1872. From this very early time "Carbon Paper" was seen as the natural partner to the typewriter. The copying machine that we know today was many long years away, but from this time a spell was cast over the world of business: correspondence was not magic, it was not unique, it was of somewhat secondary importance, and a company could feel free to fill up drawer after drawer with the issuings of the typewriter machine. A businessman who in 1860 would rather die than let someone else write a letter for him, would think nothing by 1910 of saying to his female secretary, "Write a letter for me about . . . I'll sign it." A formal signature could take care of legalities if any were involved, but the actual business of writing lost whatever sacred importance it may have once had.

Inventions like the typewriter, carbon paper, and later, thanks to Thomas Alva Edison, the dictaphone, whereby an executive could separate himself entirely from the "written word," had the effect of downgrading the importance of writing. But at the same time these things made possible the proliferation of writing. No longer would it be necessary (or possible) to center the whole of a corporation's doings in the authority of a single individual like Mr. Henry du Pont with his 6,000 self-written letters a year. The corporation was becoming bureaucratized and specialized toward the end of the nineteenth century, and instead of the single entrepreneur attempting to run all the affairs of the company from top to bottom, there were soon layers upon layers of specialized functions, many of these in turn being further delegated to (usually female) assistants and clerical sub-specialists, which would have been anathema in 1850.

But whether these technological changes and the bureaucratization of business were favorable or unfavorable to the written word is a bit difficult to say. Undoubtedly there was the general clearing up in the public literacy around the time of the Civil War mentioned by Edmund Wilson. This had the effect of making a certain kind of windiness obsolete, and rigid formality less natural than it once was. On the hand, the vaster complexity of business was doubtless responsible for the appearance of many new abstractions and of many new specialized jargons and patterns of thought. Too, certain later flowerings of business, like the field of advertising, were to come along with their own original kinds of assaults on the language, although they might occasionally, very occasionally, be creative and inspirational as well.

The most definite negative in the whole picture of Civil War American business was the adverse effect of the depersonalization and institutionalization of business. By and large before the Civil War the typical businessman lived in a world in which he made regular and daily contact with the realities of everyday life. Even the wealthiest of businessmen thought of themselves not as living in a world apart but as entirely embedded in the mainstream of social life. They did not distance themselves either by means of abstractions or standardized habits of thought. And in these earlier more pioneering times the writing (except occasionally for that perfunctory opening and closing to letters that was a sop to some older and imagined aristocratic politeness) could be very good indeed.

The Dun and Bradstreet Company many years ago issued a centennial volume concerned with its activities in the field of credit. It unearthed from its archives some examples of what credit reports were like in the 1830's. It comes as no little surprise to find that they were marvelously well written and delineated their subjects with deftness and precision. For example, here are three sample paragraphs written by one Thomas Wren Ward in the 1830's—reports written back to Baring Bros & Company of London who were seeking accurate reports on how their capital was being used on the American shore. Ward wrote to them in characteristically sharp and vivid terms that certainly would have been eschewed by 1900. In the 1830's business had not yet been cut loose from the warp and woof of daily social life, and it was still possible to write like this:

> *Andreas Dunlap*, Washington—District Attorney, U.S. Court!! A rank radical and high Jackson man. Has $15,000 and a good income from his profession and other expectations. Safe enough—but I gave him the credit because at the moment he applied there was some talk about the account in London being changed in Washington and he has influence there for good or evil—however I might as well have omitted it. —December 1, 1833
>
> *Thomas D. Curtis*, Boston—Through a personal friend of mine and his business passing before me, I do not know his property. I feel confident that Curtis and Baylies have done a very good business and I have seen no bad business of theirs. I think highly of Curtis as to honor and capacity and conclude he may have $25,000 or $30,000 and Baylies $40,000 or $50,000. I have great confidence that they will always keep safe. —1835.
>
> *Lee & Goodwin*, Boston—Are in order. I am surprised that I have not mentioned Mr. Goodwin's capital. He is a steady, prudent, honorable, popular man worth $80,000. W. Lee has $30,000 or $40,000 and his family have large expectations. The collateral branches all rich and honourable—Lee has failed three times and paid up all each time and I think the chances are in favour of not failing again. They have a handsome India commission business—and do not trade largely on their own account. I see no great hazard unless in selling Rupee bills endorsed by them for Palmer, McKillop & Co. of London but I do not know to what extent their bills are sold. I consider Lee & Goodwin as a good account and they are a very popular

house—and you should give them particular advice and trust them with attention and confidence. —1835[5]

There is a forthrightness, a directness, a kind of masculine incisiveness and independence in this writing that doubtless would have disappeared by 1900, and certainly with the appearance of the organization man of the large corporation.

The most devastating blow to writing at the end of the nineteenth century (counterbalancing all of the advances in technology and the chastening of American prose style in general), was the appearance of armies of "white collar workers," clerical types, who lacked the audacity and determination of the earlier entrepreneur who was almost always an adventurer, and even sometimes a buccaneer. The white collar worker, whether enshrouded in the mysterious depths of the giant corporation or sweating it out by himself in some small-town bill collecting establishment, would naturally gravitate toward language which already had the ring of respect about it, the official stamp of approval, the feel of ironclad forms and rose-scented propriety. He would prefer language that is timid, anemic, safe, and stereotyped to language that is bold, incisive, clear, and positive. He would eschew humor, personality, and lightness in favor of whatever ponderosities and grave abstractions might be near at hand.

The nineteenth century gave business writing a lot to move forward with, but in actual historical development every forward step was countered by equally powerful forces of gravity and inertness that have always impeded the advances of language.

Notes and References

1. Letter to Hon. Samuel Preston. Quoted in Edward Harold Mott, *Between the Ocean and the Lakes, The Story of Erie*, (New York: John S. Collins, 1900), p. 6. Like most letters of this period, this was a genuine autograph letter not copied by a scriviner.

2. Stewart H. Holbrook, *The Age of the Moguls*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1953), p. 256.

3. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 636-38; 650.

4. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience*, (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 399.

5. Ray A. Foulke, *The Sinews of American Commerce*, (New York: Dun and Bradstreet, Inc., n.d.), pp. 361-62.

"Elegant Simplicity": Lord Chesterfield's Ideal for Business Writing*

William E. Rivers
University of South Carolina

Frequently a message from the past has a freshness and impact that cannot be paralleled by a modern passage expressing the same ideas. This statement is particularly appropriate when applied to Lord Chesterfield's comments on the writing of business letters. His "quaint," eighteenth-century style tends to freshen our interest in concepts grown cliché-ridden and therefore stale through everyday use. His sensitivity to the concerns of business writing not only shows us that we are working in a tradition much older than we might have thought, but also tends to give those principles a new aura of validity. The purpose of this paper is to review Chesterfield's advice on business writing since it renews our belief that the principles presently advocated are valid, and to emphasize, as he did, the necessity of developing a clear yet "harmonious" prose style by carefully reading and studying the best authors in our language.

Philip Dormer Stanhope (1694-1773), 4th Earl of Chesterfield, was a distinguished eighteenth-century statesman, diplomat, and patron of arts and letters. Chesterfield was fortunate in that he lived early enough in the century to be a political ally of Bolingbroke, Pope, Swift, and others who joined their attacks on Robert Walpole's administration. He thus knew and was stimulated by some of the best political essayists and satirists ever to write in English. And yet he lived late enough in the century to know most of Samuel Johnson's work and even to have a personal encounter with this man who, more than any other, shaped literary and moral opinion in the second half of the century. In fact, Chesterfield's famous encounter with Johnson shows his genuine admiration of artful writing: he could not resist praising the fine and powerful style of Johnson even in a piece of writing so personally unflattering to him as Johnson's scathing letter rejecting Chesterfield's belated offer of patronage.[1]

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Chesterfield, however, was not just an admirer of the great writers around him. He was an accomplished stylist in his own right who relied heavily on his ability to use the written word to ensure his diplomatic and business success. The technological limitations of his age (which he probably thought of simply as realities and not as limitations) required him to conduct most of his business through letters. This led him to see, perhaps more emphatically than we, the importance of clear, persuasive writing.

Chesterfield's most famous writings are his letters to his illegitimate son, Philip Dormer Stanhope (1732-1768). It is in these letters that Chesterfield put into writing the principles which had governed the way he thought, acted, and wrote throughout his career. Since he had no legitimate children, Chesterfield lavished all his paternal attention, love, and, most of all, his paternal aspirations on his son, who Chesterfield decided was to become a diplomat, statesman, and generally successful man of the world. Chesterfield spent a great deal of money and, more importantly, devoted a great deal of his own time and energy in his attempt to make Philip in this image. His letters to his son, which were written to be an important part of the boy's education, are therefore filled with sage suggestions on how Philip should conduct himself in social, political, and business situations so as to win the respect and admiration of those with whom he dealt.

The educational program itself was a failure. Philip was simply not cut out, physically or temperamentally, to be the refined, controlled, calculating politician and socialite Chesterfield wanted him to be. Nevertheless, the letters, published in 1774, the year after Chesterfield's death, were immediately famous throughout England. In some circles, however, they immediately became "infamous." Everyone recognized the "utility" in the letters; many though could not accept the moral code they found stated and implied in the collection and therefore vigorously attacked it as being a degenerating influence on English youth. Samuel Johnson, the most outspoken and respected moralist of his time, denounced the letters for teaching, as he put it, "the morals of a whore and the manners of a dancing master."[2]

Justification for Johnson's comment can be easily found in the letters, for Chesterfield advised his son to employ many questionable tactics in order to achieve his social and diplomatic goals. For example, he encouraged Philip to flatter his friends and acquaintances; to probe them constantly for weaknesses to be exploited; and, for his own protection, never to reveal his own thoughts and feelings so that he might be exploited by others. Chesterfield also advised Philip to distrust ideals, and to be ever willing to compromise what ought to be for the necessities of the moment. And what probably rankled the moral Dr. Johnson more than anything else, Chesterfield encouraged his son to practice fashionable adultery for personal pleasure and political leverage.

Chesterfield's apologists, including Bonamy Dobree,[3] have defended him by saying that the deception and questionable conduct he advocated are of relatively minor importance compared to the emphasis on virtue found elsewhere in the letters. Even Dr. Johnson, obviously no admirer of the Lord, was willing to grant Chesterfield's letters some value: "Take out the immorality," he said, "and it should be put in the hands of every young gentleman."[4] Samuel Shellabarger, a mid-twentieth-century commentator on Chesterfield, counters Johnson's observation by saying that the emphasis on "secular virtue and expedient compromise" so permeates the letters and Chesterfield's basic philosophy that if we take out the immorality we have little left of interest or value.[5] Though this debate on the morality of the letters is interesting, it is not our main concern here. Perhaps it is best to say simply that if we do take out the immorality some very interesting and valuable advice on many subjects, including writing, does remain.

Philip's writing ability (or inability) comes up in three letters written by his father fairly early in Philip's obligatory Grand Tour of Europe. In July of 1750 Lord Chesterfield decided that Philip, then 18 years old, should concentrate his efforts on those qualities he had not yet mastered which were essential to the success of a diplomat. Chesterfield had no trouble coming up with what he called a list of Philip's "debits," which included enunciation, manners, and English. To Chesterfield they were all serious shortcomings, but according to him, Philip need not despair—he simply should work harder to correct them. In this letter he tells his son:

> Thus I have, with the truth and freedom of the tenderest affection, told you all your defects, at least all I know or have heard of. Thank God they are all very curable, they must be cured, and I am sure you will cure them. (July 9, 1750)[6]

Most teachers of English composition, I suppose, agree with Chesterfield when he says writing problems are "curable." However, I am not sure that after several years of teaching most would make a statement as emphatic and unqualified as Chesterfield's. At this time in his life, though, Chesterfield apparently believed that such "cures" were within reach. In a letter written only a few months earlier (November 24, 1749) he assured his son that though "a man must be born a poet . . . he may make himself an orator." But Chesterfield eventually learned that such "cures" were not so sure as he first believed. He never did "cure" his son's social manners to his satisfaction. He seemed to have had similar trouble "curing" Philip's writings because approximately a year and a half after he listed Philip's "debits" and admonished him to begin his "cure," Chesterfield found need to write a letter almost entirely devoted to the craft of writing business letters.

Chesterfield's comments on business writing in this letter (December 19, 1751) and in two previous letters (November 24, 1749, and July 9, 1750) are not

profound; they are commonplace observations based on his years of personal experience and his own common sense. To say that his observations are not profound is not to say, however, that what he said is not shrewd or valid. The quality of his thoughts on this topic can be easily demonstrated by pointing out that the principles that underlie his admonitions are those that are still followed in current composition texts—especially those devoted to business and professional writing. The passage of over 200 years has proven the accuracy of Chesterfield's insight into the language of affairs, and subsequent changes in usage and style have made the language he used to talk about writing seem at once both old and fresh to our ears.

In the letter devoted mainly to business letters (December 19, 1751), Chesterfield concentrates on three basic characteristics of good business letters: clarity, audience awareness, and a pleasing style. On clarity he places his strongest and earliest emphasis. His letter begins

> My Dear Friend:
> You are now entered upon a scene of business, where I hope you will one day make a figure. Use does a great deal, but care and attention must be joined to it. The first thing necessary in writing letters of business is extreme clearness and perspicuity; every paragraph should be so clear and unambiguous, that the dullest fellow in the world may not be able to mistake it, nor obliged to read it twice in order to understand it.

The "dullards" Chesterfield had in mind were probably less intelligent members of a small educated class and perhaps brighter than those we might call "dullards" today. Chesterfield's comment, though doubtlessly formulated to achieve emphasis, does again reveal his optimism about improving human communication. His optimism, however, was tempered by his realization that becoming a good writer requires attention to detail; he therefore rarely made general observations about writing without illustrating them with more specific directives or examples. For example, interspersed among his frequent general observations on the importance of clarity and simplicity in business writing that follow this attention-getting opening are warnings about particular stylistic matters that might impair the intelligibility of any letter. He first warns Philip not to overwrite. Avoid, he says, "tropes, figures, antitheses, epigrams," "florishes," and "declamation." According to Chesterfield all of these devices are "misplaced" or even "impertinent" in business letters because they interfere with the "elegant simplicity" he felt was "required" in business writing. He also saw that sentence length helped determine whether a piece of writing met his rigorous requirements. "Let your periods be harmonious," he advised, "without seeming to be laboured; and let them not be too long, for that always occasions a degree of obscurity."

Most of the specific comments Chesterfield devoted to matters of clarity in this letter concern problems which the careless use of pronouns can generate.

Since he was an Englishman who spoke several continental languages fluently, Chesterfield was particularly sensitive to this relative weakness in English.

> Our pronouns and relatives often create obscurity or ambiguity; be therefore exceedingly attentive to them, and take care to mark out with precision their particular relations. For example: Mr. Johnson acquainted me that he had seen Mr. Smith, who had promised him to speak to Mr. Clarke, to return him (Mr. Johnson) those papers which he (Mr. Smith) had left some time ago with him (Mr. Clarke); it is better to repeat a name, though unnecessarily, ten times, than to have the person mistaken once.

Chesterfield follows this lesson on personal pronouns with one on relative pronouns. He first clarifies the distinctions among *who*, *which*, and *that* and then illustrates the stylistic variety that can be acquired by alternating *which* and *that*.

Although Chesterfield singled out verbosity, long sentences, and improper use of pronouns as major impediments to the easy comprehension of any writing, he also realized that the clarity or obscurity of any passage depends on many stylistic and organizational factors. He ends the first paragraph of the letter with a sentence that not only restates his emphasis on clarity but also calls his son's attention to the need for coherence in larger writing units.

> Let your first attention be to clearness, and read every paragraph after you have written it, in the critical view of discovering whether it is possible that any one man can mistake the true sense of [that paragraph]; and correct it accordingly.

As a career politician and diplomat Chesterfield was particularly aware of the need to fit the style, diction, and content of any written communication to its intended audience. That fact is, I believe, implicit in the comments on clarity and simplicity already mentioned. But it can also be seen in his acute consciousness of the impression even little mechanical things make upon the reader. The faults he mentions on this subject all seem to be problems he saw in young Philip's letters, and his approach was apparently calculated to shame his son into correcting them.

> I should not mention correct orthography, but that you very often fail in that particular, which will bring ridicule upon you; for no man is allowed to spell ill. I wish too that your handwriting were much better and I cannot conceive why it is not, since every man may certainly write whatever hand he pleases. Neatness in folding up, sealing, and directing your packets, is by no means to be neglected; though I dare say you think it is. But there is something in the exterior, even of a packet, that may please or displease; and consequently worth some attention.

Apparently Philip's handwriting style was, in his father's eyes at least, atrocious. In one of his earlier letters on writing (July 9, 1750), Chesterfield was even more severe.

> The next thing necessary in your destination, is writing correctly, elegantly, and in a good hand too; in which three particulars, I am sorry to tell you, that you hitherto

> fail. Your handwriting is a very bad one, and would make a scurvy figure in an office book of letters, or even in a lady's pocket-book. But that fault is easily cured by care, since every man who has the use of his eyes and of his right hand can write whatever hand he pleases.

Chesterfield pushes his point a little deeper in this letter by varying his own handwriting in the last six words to demonstrate that he at least has "the use of his eyes and of his right hand."

Chesterfield's emphasis on cultivating the reader's regard through writing is even more evident in his paragraph on politeness. Although the phrases he used here to illustrate his point are clearly tied to his place and time, they do reveal his sensitivity to the relationship between the writer and reader.

> Business does not exclude (as possibly you wish it did) the usual terms of politeness and good-breeding, but, on the contrary, strictly requires them; such as, *I have the honour to acquaint you Lordship; Permit me to assure you; If I may be allowed to give my opinion, etc.* For the Minister abroad, who writes to the Minister at home, writes to his superior; possibly to his patron, or at least to one who he desires should be so. (December 19, 1751)

The emphasis on audience awareness in this paragraph very naturally led Chesterfield into a more direct treatment of the relationship between style and audience response in the following paragraph. Here he points out that business letters are improved by the inclusion of "*certain graces*" (i.e., compliments and subtle embellishments of style). However, he warns that

> they must be scattered with a sparing and a skillful hand; they must fit their place exactly. They must decently adorn without encumbering, and modestly shine without glaring. But as this is the utmost degree of perfection in letters of business, I would not advise you to attempt those embellishments till you have first laid your foundation well.

An elegant but clear style is thus the ultimate goal for the business writer and "style" the basic element that determines both elegance and clarity—the two aspects of writing that most impress a reader. Chesterfield was untiring in his emphasis on the importance of style. Over and over again in his letter on business letters (December 19, 1751) he mentions the need for the businessman and any writer to use a graceful and appealing style. " . . . Clearness," he said, "implies a correctness, without excluding an elegancy of style." He counsels his son to let his sentences "be harmonious, without seeming to be laboured." And, after telling Philip to avoid "flourishes" and "declamation," he qualifies that advice by saying: "But (I repeat it again) there is an elegant simplicity and dignity of style absolutely necessary for good letters of business; attend to that carefully." Chesterfield's fullest discussion of style is found in the first of his three letters on writing. This letter (November 24, 1749) is confined almost exclusively to style because he saw it as one of his son's major deficiencies.

> Style is the dress of thoughts; and let them be ever so just, if your style is homely, coarse, and vulgar, they will appear to as much disadvantage, and be as ill received as your person, though ever so well proportioned, would, if dressed in rages, dirt, and tatters. It is not every understanding that can judge of matter, but every ear can and does judge, more or less, of style; and were I either to speak or write to the public, I should prefer moderate matter, adorned with all the beauties and elegances of style, to the strongest matter in the world, ill-worded and ill-delivered.

In this passage Chesterfield seems to suggest that manner is more important than matter and thus to run the risk of placing himself among those rhetoricians who use language to deceive—a group rightly criticized by thoughtful, moral persons since at least the time of Socrates. I do not believe Chesterfield belongs in that group because here and elsewhere the main thrust of his argument is that "manner" is of central importance only because without a clear and pleasing style the content or "matter" of any speech or piece of writing cannot be comprehended. Moreover, even in this passage he only compares "moderate: and "strongest" "matter" and does not admit "inferior" or "deceptive" "matter" into his consideration at all.

The sample Chesterfield provides to illustrate the dangers of a poor style and his discussion of that example further demonstrate that he saw style not as a means of deception but as a vehicle for conveying to listeners or readers an accurate and (hopefully) appealing picture of a person's thoughts and abilities. The hypothetical letter he offered is to the Secretary of State in London from a diplomat in the Hague.

> Mr. Lord,
> I *had*, last night, the honour of your Lordship's letter of the 24th; and will *set about doing* the orders contained therein; and *if so be* that I can get that affair done by the next post, I will not fail *for to* give your Lordship an account of it by *next post*. I have told the French Minister, *as how*, *that if* that affair be not soon concluded, your Lordship would think it *all long of him*; and that he must have neglected *for to* have wrote to his Court about it. I must beg leave to put your Lordship in mind, *as how*, that I am now full three quarters in arrear; and if *so be* that I do not very soon receive at least one half year, I shall *cut a very bad figure*; for this here place is very dear. I shall be *vastly beholden* to your Lordship for *that there* mark of your favour; and so I *rest*, or *remain*, Your, etc.

Chesterfield admitted that his example was a "*caricatura*" of a poor style, but assured his son that "a despatch with less than half these faults would blow you up for ever." Chesterfield's emphasis here is on avoiding those stylistic faults that can easily open one to ridicule and thereby undermine a reader's confidence in what is written. But in this letter and the others on writing Chesterfield clearly conveys his belief that a good style, characterized by "the upmost purity and elegancy," is an important, if not essential, factor in getting readers to pay any serious attention to what is written.

If "elegant simplicity" is so very important in writing, how did Chesterfield suggest a writer acquire it? In all three of the letters on writing that Chesterfield sent to his son, he admonishes Philip to read the best authors to improve his prose style. In the letter of November 1749 Chesterfield suggests three English writers while in December 1751 he recommends two Continental authors and another English author.

> You have with you three of four of the best English authors, Dryden, Atterbury, and Swift: read them with the utmost care, and with a particular view to their language; and they may possible correct that *curious infelicity of diction* which you acquired in Westminister.
>
> . . .
>
> Cardinal d'Ossat's letters are the true letters of business; those of Monsieur D'Avaux are excellent; Sir William Temple's are very pleasing, but I fear too affected. Carefully avoid all Greek and Latin quotations; and bring no precedents from the *virtuous Spartans, the polite Athenians, and the brave Romans*. Leave all that to futile pedants.[7]

Obviously, in Chesterfield's mind, style was not something that could be mastered in an afternoon—it is something that must be absorbed over a long period of time through wide and careful reading. Chesterfield's suggestion is very much in keeping with eighteenth-century educational practices. In that period grammar school and university students polished their Latin prose style by reading and then imitating the best Roman authors. This practice naturally and easily transferred to the study of English prose as seen in the advice of Chesterfield and, to mention another famous example, the practice of Benjamin Franklin, who imitated the prose style he found in Addison and Steele's *Spectator*.[8]

One further point about Chesterfield's advice on style and reading should be made. All of the authors he recommended worked and wrote in the world of human affairs and thus avoided the pedantry he so strongly criticized. The elegance Chesterfield advocated was not that elegance artificially contrived by closeted academics. It was forceful, clear elegance forged in the world of business where language must work to survive.

Notes and References

1. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, edited by R. W. Chapman. A New Edition Corrected by J. D. Fleeman. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 183-187.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

3. *The Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. with intro. by Bonamy Dobree, 6 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1932), pp. 162-169.

4. Boswell, p. 734.

5. Samuel Shellabarger, *Lord Chesterfield and his World*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), p. 341.

6. All quotations from Chesterfield's *Letters* are from Dobree's edition. Quotations from the letters are identified by date in the text. The letters quoted appear on the following pages in Dobree's edition: November 24, 1749 (No. 1672), pp. 1442-1446; July 9, 1750 (No. 1713), pp. 1561-1566; and December 19, 1751 (No. 1801, pp. 1799-1802.

7. In the letter of July 9, 1750, Chesterfield did not mention specific authors but did offer the same advice: "As to the correctness and elegancy of your writing, attention to grammar does the one, and to the best authors the other."

8. Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography and Other Pieces*. Ed. and Intro. by Dennis Welland (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 12-13.

From Press Book and Pigeonhole to Vertical Filing: Revolution in Storage and Access Systems for Correspondence*

JoAnne Yates
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The historical development of the rhetoric and style of business writing should naturally be of interest to business communication teachers. As we examine the history of business writing, however, we should not ignore the developing communication *systems* in businesses. Letters, reports, and memos do not occur in a vacuum. They occur within a complex system of organizational structure and function, communication channels, technology of production and reproduction, and storage and access media. This system affects and is affected by the messages that pass through it. Just as we cannot fully understand the structure and style of Dickens' novels without understanding nineteenth century serial publication in England, we cannot fully understand current or historical business documents without understanding the system within which they function. The system affects and, as one of my colleagues puts it, "enables" certain kinds of written documents.

The communication system in American businesses underwent rapid and major structural changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These changes in the communication system were part of even larger changes in the structure of American companies. Alfred Chandler has traced the shift in American commerce from domination by small, owner-operated businesses to domination by the large, managerial and usually multidivisional corporation.[1] As companies grew, the amount of external correspondence they had to handle also grew. Further, as layers of management evolved and departments proliferated, written internal communication grew from minimal to a major component of a company's written communication. Changes in the technology of production and reproduction of documents took place at the same time.[2] The typewriter and carbon paper transformed the office.

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Tied in with these changes was the change I want to focus on in this study: the revolution in storage and access systems for written documents, especially internal and external correspondence.[3] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries[4] various pressures caused businesses to shift gradually from using the cumbersome, chronologically organized press book and the pigeonhole to using vertical filing systems (still the most common systems today) organized alphabetically, numerically, or topically.

In these early days of the office of the future, the ubiquitous manila files and their cousins the hanging files seem among the least interesting items of office equipment. We are hard pressed to imagine their invention as a major event in the history of communication. Yet the development of vertical filing was as important a change in the communication system of that time as the shift to computer storage, transmission, and access is to our time. In both cases a change in the communication system has repercussions on the nature and form of the documents themselves. Thus, by studying the earlier transformation, we may better understand the current one.

In this paper, I will describe the nineteenth century system of storage and access in American manufacturing companies, the pressures on this old system, and the evolution of the new system at the beginning of the twentieth century. Finally, I will examine the implications of the filing revolution for the communication system as a whole and suggest parallels with the modern electronic revolution. Throughout, I will illustrate the general trend with a discussion of the shift in storage and access in one particular company: Scovill Manufacturing Company of Waterbury, Connecticut.[5]

One of several manufacturers of brass and brass products in Connecticut, Scovill dates its origin from 1802, though it was not incorporated under its current name until 1850.[6] It grew from a family business producing brass buttons to a diversified corporation currently listed in the Fortune 500. In 1914, the year it converted to vertical filing, it employed 4,000. At that point growth was still primarily from within; only later did it diversify substantially from metal alloys and products by acquiring other companies. As the following discussion will show, Scovill seems to exemplify fairly well the general shift to vertical filing as described in early twentieth century books on office management.

Storage and Access before the Revolution in Filing

In 1913, in the midst of the filing revolution, E. A. Cope, a British expert on filing, warned against a naive, ahistorical view of this revolution:

> The large and obviously increasing attention devoted in these days by business men and their managers and assistants, as well as by investors, manufacturers, and

> selling firms, to what are styled "filing systems," should not lead us to the conclusion that methods of filing business documents, and the manufacture and sale of appliances designed to facilitate the effective filing of business papers, are entirely of recent origin. Such a conclusion would be altogether contrary to fact. There have been methodical men ever since commerce began.[7]

The concept of a storage and access system for important documents was not invented at the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, the word "file" itself is not a new one. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it comes from the Latin "filum" or thread. The original files were threads upon which documents were strung chronologically for preservation.[8]

Nineteenth century commercial America was not lacking in Cope's methodical men (only later did women take over primary responsibility for record-keeping), concerned for the maintenance of records essential to their businesses. At this time their correspondence was small in volume by our standards and primarily external. Businesses were still small enough that at a given site orders, instructions, and reports were generally given orally. In fact, as late as 1887, when other companies had apparently begun to use more written instructions and rules, Scovill's treasurer, M. L. Sperry, defended the oral system:

> We have never had any shop rules printed. There is a general understanding that ten hours constitute a day's work and that the hands are expected to do a day's work if they get a day's pay. Each department is under the direction of a foreman, in whom we trust and who sees that the hands are industrious and attend to their business. If they do not do it, he sends them off and gets others. . . . We do not think printed rules amount to anything unless there is somebody around constantly to enforce them and if such a person is around printed forms can be dispensed with.[9]

Internal correspondence at this time was more frequently letters between branch offices or partners in different cities, but these letters tended to be treated as external correspondence.

Methodical managers, then, had to have systems for handling this primarily external correspondence. The press book (also called a copy book) served both to reproduce, in conjunction with a letter press, and to store copies of outgoing correspondence. A press book is a bound book containing 300-500 sheets of tissue paper. Letters were written or (later) typed with copying ink, and when they were ready to be sent out, they were placed between the dampened sheets of tissue in the book. Then a letter press was used to compress the book, causing impressions of the letters to remain on the tissue paper sheets.[10] The contents of each press volume were usually indexed alphabetically by customer or subject in the front. You had to know the approximate date of a letter, however, to get you to the correct letter press book. These press books, then, served as a chronological record of all outgoing correspondence, with the index facilitating access somewhat.

M. L. Sperry, in spite of his aversion to printed shop rules, saw this record of correspondence as crucial. In Scovill's memorial minute to him, he is praised for making it the "'law of the Company (like the laws of the Medes and Persians unchangeable) that no letters are to be mailed unless press copies are retained. In cases where you must either miss your train or not take the copy—*miss the train* and take the copy.'"[11]

Incoming correspondence whether from customers, agents, or partners—also had to be stored in some manner. No single method like the press book dominated here. A combination of spindles, pigeonholes, and boxes tended to house the records. Sometimes groups of letters were bundled together by subject for storage, but more frequently the bundles simply grouped papers by time period.[12] In any case, incoming and outgoing correspondence on the same topic was always separated, since the outgoing correspondence was in the press book.

Pressures on the Old System

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the old systems began to feel the increasing pressures that would culminate in the filing revolution. Increased volume of correspondence, proliferation of departments and layers of management, and the trend toward scientific management all contributed to the change.

The press book and pigeonholes worked adequately for relatively low levels of correspondence. Starting in the later part of the nineteenth century, however, the volume of paper to be handled grew enormously. The revolutions in transportation and communication described by Chandler were accomplished by the growth of enormous new railroad and telegraph companies; these revolutions, in turn, enabled manufacturing firms to carry on more transactions and consequently to employ more people.[13] First the railroad companies (around midcentury), and then manufacturing companies, were faced with the problem of increased volume of correspondence.

Scovill encountered its crisis of volume in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Its work force grew from 400 in 1876 to 4,000 in 1914. In 1879, as an initial accommodation to growth, the company started separate series of press books for correspondence to each of their three branch stores. The growth continued, however. In 1880, the company used up five press books in copying correspondence to the New York store; by 1900 the rate had doubled to approximately ten press books each year.[14] As the pace quickened, indexing became less complete, also. Some press books from around 1900 have no index. Thus tracking down a particular letter, unless you knew its date within a few days, became increasingly difficult. One incident will illustrate the

problem. In December of 1913, just before Scovill adopted a vertical filing system, a manager at the main office in Waterbury wrote to a manager in the New York store as follows: "Replying to yours of the 24th regarding terms to Jos. L. Porter and Co., we are sorry that our record for 1908 is quite as inaccessible as yours seem to be, and unless you consider the matter of enough importance, you will let the matter pass."[15] Obviously, the communication system is failing to provide adequate storage and access at this point. The volume of correspondence has outgrown the system for dealing with it.

During this period companies not only grew; they also changed in form, as Chandler shows in *The Visible Hand*. Departments with specialized functions developed, and a hierarchy of professional managers grew up to administer them.[16] Writing in 1913, E. A. Cope noted the implications of this change in form for the communication structure:

> A large business in the modern sense means an enormously increased specialization, a division into departments, a subdivision of work. It means also an enormous multiplication of the quantity of business papers, and a multiplication of the kinds and varieties of business papers. Special records not needed in the comparatively small businesses of the past are necessary to enable the details of the great businesses of the present to be traced, to enable the work of departments to be supervised and kept under effective control, and thus to prevent the doings of the huge modern concern from getting out of hand.[17]

In the departmentalized business, more internal correspondence is needed to keep production running smoothly. Writing a few years earlier, James Griffith also discussed this newly discovered need for "interdepartmental" correspondence, enumerating some of the functions it performed. First, he said, "Every department head finds it necessary at times to request information from other departments. Even with an intercommunicating telephone system, with which every large office and plant should be equipped, many of these requests are of a nature that, to guard against misunderstandings, demand written communications." In addition to this lateral communication, he noted the need for increasing amounts of downward communication: "There are also many notes giving instructions, either from a department head to his subordinates, or from the executive heads to the heads of departments."[18] The larger, more complex organizations could no longer be run by word of mouth.

This rapid expansion of internal written communication caused by the changing form of American business put pressure on the older methods of storage and access. In the past, internal correspondence had been limited and could be specially handled. By the turn of the century (and earlier for some companies) the volume of such correspondence in most big businesses was pushing the limits of those methods. In fact, the lack of an adequate system for

handling internal correspondence may even have restricted its expansion, or at least made it entirely ephemeral. I will come back to this point when I discuss the implications of the filing revolution. Clearly, the need to handle more different kinds of correspondence must have put pressure on the old methods.

One final factor probably encouraged the abandonment of the old methods for the new: the trend toward scientific management and "system." Though the initial trend begun by Frederick Taylor in the late nineteenth century focused on systematizing the factory, not the office, he was rapidly followed by Alexander Church and others who saw a need to systematize the entire operation of a company, not just factory production.[19] This trend probably contributed to the revolution in filing in two ways. First, in its emphasis on monitoring internal operations, scientific management would require many new types of internal documents. Second, someone attempting to streamline a company's operations might view the inefficient correspondence storage and access system as an obvious candidate for reform.

This potential link between systematic management and improved filing was made explicit in *Business Administration: The Principles of Business Organization and System, and the Actual Methods of Business Operation and Management*, published in 1909 by The System Company. In it, Carl Parsons asserted that "Business has been reduced to an exact science." He sees the "perfected business machine" as analogous to "one of the wonderful and intricate labor-saving machines in a factory," and that "perfected business machine" includes the correspondence department and filing system.[20] In the early years of the twentieth century, one of the manufacturers of the new equipment, the Shaw-Walker Company, published a magazine entitled *System*, primarily concerned with system in managing paperwork in the office. The trend to scientific or systematic management, then, probably encouraged the shift to the new filing "systems."

The Evolution of the Vertical Filing System

By the late nineteenth century the pressures on the old press book and pigeonhole methods were becoming severe. Vertical filing did not emerge full blown from this crisis, however. First came flat files with various indexing systems, then systems for reproducing documents in unbound form. These changes prepared the way for the final shift. Thus the revolution in filing was, in fact, an evolution, consisting of interlocking changes in storage medium, indexing system, and method of reproduction. This evolution was seen as important by businesses and educators alike.

The first stage of the evolutionary process was the development of various types of flat files for storing incoming and sometimes internal correspondence,

often arranged in some manner other than purely chronologically.[21] The first type of flat file, the pasteboard box file, "consisted of a box, its cover opening like a book, with twenty-five or twenty-six pages or pieces of manila paper, tabbed with the letters of the alphabet and fastened into the box at one side, the papers being filed between these sheets."[22] Box files were quickly modified into cabinet flat files—wooden cabinets with shallow, pull-out drawers that opened like the box files. By 1881 Cameron, Amberg, and Co. advertised a full line of these cabinets, in addition to the box files Scovill continued to use.[23] This system made each file more accessible than when boxes were stacked on top of each other, and took less space than putting the boxes on shelves. The railroads were among the pioneers of flat files, and continued to use them long after most manufacturing companies had converted to vertical files.[24]

As the above description of a box file indicates, the box and flat files were frequently organized alphabetically, though, as Duffield went on to say, "Papers were filed in groups only and little attention was paid to arranging them beyond the first letter."[25] Still, this rudimentary alphabetical system was a material step forward from the chronological press book. The flat files seem also to have been used without alphabetical organization, to hold all incoming correspondence relating to a particular major customer, for example. According to a 1948 memo of instructions for organizing Scovill archives, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century incoming correspondence (outgoing correspondence, of course, was still handled by press books) was stored in "Special Ambergs" and General Ambergs," "Ambergs" being a brand of box files. Special Ambergs were "files of correspondence with the principal customers of the company" arranged in date order, while General Ambergs contained "the miscellaneous correspondence with customers filed under alphabetical letters."[26]

The railroads, early users of the box files and of later versions of flat files, developed one of the indexing methods later adopted by some manufacturing companies. They had great quantities of internal correspondence not related to particular customers. To handle this correspondence, they tended to number their files, originally in a rather haphazard fashion. William Henry Williams, who had a special interest in the topic, described the early system in this way:

> The general practice is to number subjects in regular numerical order as they arise. This is further amplified by assigning new numbers to subdivisions of the subjects and to correspondence of particular importance, and later, to that relating to two or more of these subdivisions of the same subject. The File Clerks look upon the several subjects, or subdivisions, in a different light, and we soon find many duplicate numbers; for instance, instead of having but one number for all correspondence relating to matters affecting but one city or town, as say No. 51 for all correspondence relating to Chicago, Illinois, the correspondence relating to

> matters affecting but one city or town, as say No. 51 for all correspondence relating to Chicago, Illinois, the correspondence relating to sidings at that point is given one number, that relating to depots another number, etc., and then correspondence relating to any two of these subjects is frequently given yet another number until there may be some 300 or 400 file numbers for Chicago. . . . As a result we find in one Superintendent's office 300 numbers, and in another Superintendent's office, 25,000 file numbers.

Thus finding a particular document could still be a problem, though the railroads were attempting a more functional organizing method than chronology, which becomes increasingly less useful as the number of documents grow.

By 1902 Williams, working under L. F. Loree, President of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company, had created a much more carefully designed, though remarkably complex, decimal numerical system based on the Dewey Decimal System for libraries.[28] Melvil Dewey had introduced his system to the library world in 1876. Williams' later adaptation used the decimal system of subdividing materials, but picked new categories based on the railroad business. In this system, the 000's were for general materials, the 100's for materials concerning the executive and legal department, the 200's for finance and accounts, the 300's for information on roadway and structures, and so on. Within each category, material could be subdivided as far as necessary. This system was apparently adopted by some, but not all, of the railroads.[29] Others continued to use simpler numerical systems. Manufacturing companies never seem to have used the Williams system, though some eventually used the simpler numerical systems with alphabetical indexes. Whatever the specific arrangement, the box and cabinet files pioneered by the railroads and adopted by manufacturing firms were clearly an improvement over the pigeonholes and paper bundles that preceded them. They could handle larger amounts of paper while imposing some system on them.

One other version of the flat file gained popularity during this time: the Shannon file. This type of flat file consists of a board with a curved piece of steel securing the papers through two holes at the top.[30] One Scovill manager had kept his instructions from the General Superintendent's office from 1907 to 1912 on one of these Shannon files. This small sheaf of papers was arranged in order of date, but an alphabetic index by topic was on top. Clearly the Shannon file filled a need for accessible storage of internal correspondence not related to specific customers.

We are now approaching the appearance of the vertical file, but we must look at one other part of the communication system that has been changing during this time: methods of reproducing documents. Typewriters had come into use a little earlier (Scovill had them by the early 1880's), but typed documents were still reproduced in the letter press. As long as the bound

press book was the only method of exactly reproducing outgoing correspondence, incoming and outgoing correspondence on the same topic could never be combined, thus leaving a major flaw in the storage and access system. To locate all the correspondence on a particular contract, one still had to go to the flat file *and* to one or more press books.

Two methods of copying that produced unbound copies gained currency, though eventually one won out over the others.[31] First, the letter press principle was modified in the roller copier:

> This method also requires the use of dampened tissue paper, which is supplied in a continuous roll. It first passes through a water bath which moistens it evenly and thoroughly, then through rubber wringing rollers, which reduce the moisture to a proper copying consistency, and finally comes in contact with the letter itself under the compression of a revolving copying roller. It is then wound upon a drying reel.
>
> . . .
>
> The paper on the reel dries in a very short time, and is then disconnected just above the last letter on the reel. The continuous strip is brought up at the back of the copier and passed under the cutting knife. Here the copies are cut apart and are then ready for filing.[32]

This method, used just before letters were mailed, produced more even press copies on separate sheets which could be filed in any way desired. The copies were on tissue paper, however, and of varying lengths. The other method, carbon copying, used alternated layers of carbon paper and regular paper beneath the original to make extra copies as the original was typed. It could be used with standard lengths and weights of paper, and took much less time than the roller copier. The principal disadvantage of this method cited by early twentieth century books on office methods was the fact that corrections or additions made after the original and carbon copy were removed from the typewriter either did not appear on the copy or were blurred. A 1909 manual for salesmen of vertical filing equipment for the Shaw-Walker Company said that carbon paper did not come to be used extensively until vertical files gained ascendancy. As late as 1926, when vertical filing was well established, the rolling copier still had its advocates.[33] Carbon paper was viewed as the more modern method, however.

Both methods, by producing copies as separate sheets, allowed escape from the chronological tyranny of the company press book. At first, however, users did not always take advantage of this feature. In 1911 Scovill apparently used both rolling copier and carbon paper, and had ceased to use bound press books, but for two more years the company used bracketed chronological books of copies of outgoing correspondence. The box files continued to house incoming correspondence only. As we shall see, Scovill only merged its outgoing and incoming correspondence when it switched to vertical files.

Although the rolling copier was generally used in the mail room of businesses and restricted mainly to external correspondence, carbon copying

and another relatively new copying method, the mimeograph, invented by Thomas Alva Edison in 1870,[34] could be used to duplicate internal correspondence. For a few copies, the carbon method worked best, but for many copies, the mimeograph provided a convenient alternative to retyping. In the second decade of the twentieth century, copying lists, occasionally quite extensive, appear on some Scovill internal correspondence. Instructions from the General Superintendent or General Manager, or from other upper level managers, frequently required multiple copies. Some of these copies appear to be mimeographed.

All of these developments in reproducing, storing, and arranging correspondence are leading toward the final (for my purposes) step: the advent of vertical filing. The main influence on the final step seems to have been library methods.[35]

The vertical card file used to catalogue holdings in libraries was, according to Library Bureau's own accounts, introduced by that company in 1876 (the year that the Dewey Decimal System was introduced).[36] Library Bureau produced card filing equipment for various libraries and provided related services. It expanded into the business market in the 1890's. According to Duffield (whose book was sponsored by Library Bureau), "The first vertical file for papers was shown by Library Bureau in 1893 at the World's Fair in Chicago."[37]

Vertical files had many advantages. Because papers stood on edge on folders, vertical files were much easier to handle than flat files. The user no longer had to lift out everything above a given document. The manila tabbed folder so familiar today was easily marked by any indexing system desired, and the system could be expanded at will. Furthermore, when a set of correspondence on some company or topic was needed, the whole folder could be lifted out, leaving the papers inside intact.

Despite all its advantages the vertical file, like most inventions, took some time to catch on, as Hudders explained:

> During the ten years following 1890, the use of the card index developed much faster than that of the vertical file, having had the earlier start, and the twentieth century had arrived before the vertical file had made any appreciable headway, and in a great many instances where the vertical file was installed the organization still retained copies of its outgoing mail in bound tissue copy books, filing only the incoming mail in the files. However, with the increased use of carbon paper as a means of duplication, together with the invention of a machine that made it possible to obtain loose tissue duplicates, the copies of outgoing letters have been gradually merged into the files with the incoming letters until the practice has become almost universal.[38]

By 1915, when Hudders wrote the preface just quoted, vertical files had become widely used and a topic of great interest to businesses.

This interest in the new filing systems is revealed in part by the number of works published on their use. By 1918 a twenty-seven page bibliography of materials on office methods (mostly filing) had appeared, written originally as a thesis for The Library School at the University of Wisconsin. In the introduction the author denied the bibliography's completeness, saying "The field is too wide to admit of comprehensive treatment in the time devoted to the subject."[39] In the list of general works on filing and indexing she lists forty-four different sources, and in the list of works specifically on filing correspondence (other sections deal with filing other types of records) she lists twenty-eight, some of which also occur in the general list. Many of these books are textbooks used in secondary level business schools or in schools devoted exclusively to filing. The New York School of Filing, founded in 1914, was apparently the first such school.[40]

Most of the books recommend consolidating correspondence files in a central filing department.[41] Specialization, they argue, is as important in records management as in finance or production. They explain how to organize such a department for maximum efficiency, including how to establish systems for assuring follow-up ("tickler" files of various sorts).[42] In general, the books seem to be trying to systematize the office as Taylor and others did the factory.

One of the major attractions of vertical files over press books and pigeonholes was flexibility of arrangement. Vertical files allowed functional, not just chronological, arrangement. Thus all the books on filing addressed the subject of indexing. Any one of four methods, some already mentioned, could be used with vertical files: alphabetical, numerical, geographical, or subject.[43] Though manufacturing companies did not adopt Williams' Dewey Decimal-based subject filing, some started out using the simpler numerical system developed and used by many railroads. Here individual customers were assigned numbers under which all the relevant correspondence was filed. The file clerk then looked up the customer in an alphabetic card index to find the correct file number. This two-step process was often claimed to reduce misfilings, and an article in a 1914 *Railway Age Gazette* asserted that "the numerical system is the one in most general use." According to most texts, however, the alphabetical method became the most widespread.[45] It eliminated the separate card index to the files. The geographical method was well adapted to certain types of sales organizations, but not to the typical manufacturing concern.

Scovill, like other companies, showed interest in vertical filing, and by the beginning of 1914 adopted such a system. Indexing was apparently a major concern for Scovill in adopting the new vertical files, and the company looked into the experiences of similar companies before deciding how they would handle their files. The first available evidence of interest in converting to a

new system is a three-page internal document dated December 12, 1912, and entitled "Vertical Letter Filing: As practiced by the Bridgeport Brass Company."[46] Someone from Scovill had apparently been sent to this neighboring (and rival) firm to investigate their system, an interesting example of diffusion of innovation. In the first half of that document the author revealed the filing principles followed by the Bridgeport Brass Company:

VERTICAL LETTER FILING

As practiced by the Bridgeport Brass Co.

They handle about 400 letters daily

(1) About two years ago they discarded entirely the numerical system of filing letters and since that time they have followed the strictly alphabetical method.

(2) *COPIES OF OUT-GOING LETTERS*

They make carbon copies of all out-going letters. No press copies whatever are made. They have never had any trouble on account of changes in original letters not appearing on the carbon copies. The carbon copy is not attached to the original letter but each is filed strictly under its respective data.

(3) *STORE LETTERS*

For stores like New York, Chicago, W. P. Swoyer, etc., they proceed as follows:

(a) If the letter refers to a customer, use the customer's name at the top of the letter as a subject and file all such letters in the general alphabetical file under the name of such customer, no matter where such letter originated, whether with a store or with Swoyer or with the customer direct. This keeps all correspondence from and about a given customer in one folder.

(b) In addition to the above, for customers like Swoyer they use a short, simple, subdivision of subjects. They will send us a typical list of such subjects as used for Swoyer.

For customers like General Electric Co. they have a new folder for each month, but no attempt is made to subdivide by headings correspondence from such people. They only subdivide by headings where they control the correspondence, as in the case of their own agents or stores.

Later in the document the author described the cabinets, folders, index cards, and sorting tables. The report is remarkably detailed in its consideration of all aspects of reproduction, storage, and access.

This thorough investigation of the system used by a neighboring firm led to action one year later. In a December 27, 1913, letter appearing in the final letter press book of correspondence from the Waterbury main office to the New York Store, Waterbury announced:

> On January 1st we shall start a new system of filing our letters and we shall use the vertical system of filing. By this system we shall distribute the store letters through the general file under the heading of the subject discussed in the letter.
>
> We shall then file through our general file under the name of the customer all your letters pertaining to said customer and all our replies about said customer will be headed and filed in the same manner.
>
> In the cases of letters about matters that do not relate to particular customers, such as financial matters and other general subjects, these will be filed in the

> general store folder, same as we have been doing in the past. We hope that by filing in the general file all letters pertaining to or about customers we shall be able to reduce to a small number the letters that must necessarily be filed in a miscellaneous folder.

Thus, for its correspondence concerning orders Scovill chose an alphabetical system by customer name, similar to that observed at Bridgeport Brass Company.

These general files seem to have been centrally maintained, as the books recommended. However, departments at Scovill apparently kept files, also. The one full set of departmental files in the archives for the period right after the switch belonged to the foreman and then superintendent of the Mills Department. His files as they have survived contain primarily *internal* documents (though they also contain some external correspondence, especially with their suppliers of raw materials and equipment). These files, too, are alphabetical, by name of internal correspondent. One wonders what he did if the head of one department moved to another department: was the person or the department the critical factor? The files themselves do not readily reveal the answer to this question.

The filing system continued to evolve slowly at Scovill (and elsewhere). In a 1917 memo, a manager in the main office asked the addressee to subdivide the railroad file into Claims, Tracers, and General. The folders in the departmental files mentioned above started, according to the dates penciled on them, at different times as the need arose. Thus adjustments to the system continued.

Implications of the Filing Revolution

Now that we have seen the evolution of vertical filing in American businesses, we may turn to the implications of this development in storage and access for the businesses as a whole and for the communication system in particular. Why did the subject receive so much attention? Cope answered that question on the most general level when he said, "It will already have become evident that it is impossible to sever the problem of finding a good practicable filing system from the whole problem of business organization. This is particularly true of all businesses large enough to be carried on departmentally."[47] A filing system is, as Cope indicated in a subhead, "A Promoter of Co-ordination and Control." Filing and indexing brought formal system to the business office in a much more comprehensive way than ever before.

The revolution had more specific implications for the communication system itself. It allowed easier and more direct access to far more documents than businesses had ever handled before. Though files were periodically

transferred out of the main files into storage, the folders stayed intact; thus correspondence was less likely to be lost. Also, topical arrangement and access—whether by subject, number, name, or place—was more functional than the chronological organization of the press book. It allowed the company to build up a body of knowledge on some issue, whether from internal or external sources, and it gave a manager rapid access to that body of knowledge. Thus each document becomes potentially more valuable in the context of related documents.

Furthermore, the correspondence itself changed in form and function in response to the change in storage and access. If Scovill's experience is typical, the conversion to a new system using some sort of subject rather than date access also had an effect on the structure and format of documents. In the December 27, 1913, Scovill letter to the New York store quoted above, after announcing the change the author gave some instructions concerning the format and structure of letters from the New York store to the Main Office:

> It will, therefore, be necessary after January 1st in writing us to observe the following requirements:
>
> (1) Write about only one subject on one sheet.
>
> (2) Place at the top of the sheet the name of the subject about which the letter is written.
>
> (3) The subject of the letter will be the name of the customer to whom the letter refers.

Only four days later, the following letter on the same subject appeared in the press book, this time from the company treasurer and general manager:

> It is my impression that you have been requested to head all of your letters with the names of the customers referred to therein, and in case an order is referred to to use the order number as well as the name.
>
> Your letters of December 29th some of them bear the order number but only three bear the customer's name, as a heading.
>
> We are changing our system of filing, and we must INSIST that you pay particular attention to this matter.[48]

Thus the new filing system was forcing the company to dictate a specific format for internal correspondence. Other matters of format (such as position of typist's initials and even letter salutation as opposed to memo heading) waver in Scovill's internal correspondence throughout the 1920's, but the subject heading is fixed.

Even more significantly, internal correspondence at Scovill is limited to a single topic in order to accommodate the new system. Even in the earlier press books, most letters to the New York store tended to deal with a single topic, but a few were in a more rambling, discursive style. Now the standard of one topic to one letter (or memorandum, as we would now call the internal correspondence) was company policy. Just as the drive for efficiency on the production floor led to specialization, with one worker performing only one

task over and over again, the demand for efficiency in the office led to specialization of documents, with one message to one document.

The revolution in filing not only affected the format and structure of individual Scovill letters; it also seems to have encouraged the growth of internal correspondence. The Scovill archives contain very few pre-1914 written messages between managers in various departments and at various levels in the main plant, and most of those are in the Shannon file of instructions from the General Manager. On the other hand, one manager's set of vertical office files contains hundreds of short and long internal documents from the late teens and early twenties. This evidence suggests enormous growth in internal correspondence after the company adopted vertical files.

Another interesting development is evident in the files as they have survived: routine reporting. Documents dealing with a specific problem or need are supplemented by routine reports on the status of various pieces of equipment, power systems, and inventories. By 1919 a list of routine reports to the General Superintendent's office, as compiled by a company statistician, contained 86 different items, some of them issued annually, others as frequently as weekly. And 35 more had been discontinued that year. Thus the internal routine reporting system was fairly complex by then.

Internal correspondence, both routine and nonroutine, may have existed earlier, and the documents may simply not have survived. That in itself would make a point about the change in the storage and access system. If such documents were all ephemeral under the earlier system, important operating information may have been lost, and a body of knowledge was not easily built up. But if we assume that the internal correspondence structure at Scovill grew up after the switch to vertical files, the possible implications are even more interesting. The filing system, by providing storage for and access to various internal documents, may have been one factor encouraging the growth of internal documentation (the scientific management trend was probably another, and wartime production doubtless a third). The system may have encouraged internal correspondence within the main plant.

If we judge by several series of exchanges concerning the routine reports, the system may even have encouraged too many of these reports. In the period from 1919 to 1922, several were eliminated as unnecessary. In each case the General Manager justified the elimination with a statement such as this:

> With reference to the weekly fire inspection report and the report of indicator post gate shut-offs made by Mr. Barker of the Plant Protection Dept., I do not think it necessary to send these reports to me in the future unless to draw attention to some peculiar or abnormal condition. I shall depend upon you to keep the inspections going, but the clerical work of making out these reports can be saved.[49]

The new system of storage and access may have played a part in a dramatic shift in the proportions of documents in the communication system. Adjustments were necessary in the wake of the shift. Thus if Scovill is typical in this regard and if my speculations are accurate, the filing revolution in America influenced the proportions of various types of documents in the communication system as well as the form of documents themselves.

These implications are not simply historical curiosities—they may be relevant to our experience today. We are now in the midst of another revolution in storage and access (as well as transmission). Computer networks and electronic mail systems are the new "filing" systems, and we can look for similar effects from this change. The parallel raises several issues. How, we might ask, will the new electronic systems affect the structure and format of business documents sent through and stored in them? Will we see still briefer and less formal communications?

And how will the systems affect the numbers and proportions of certain types of documents? In a recent letter to the *Harvard Business Review*, Judy Stein and Marya Holcombe of Yale refer to the general impression in many companies that the systems have lead to an increase in "mail," much of it unnecessary.[50] If the experience of the earlier revolution in filing is any indication, we might expect an increase in the volume of communication, followed by a period of adjustment. Will the system encourage new patterns of communication, as vertical filing may have encouraged internal correspondence? Before such parallels can be established with any certainty, more research is needed on the effects of both revolutions in the business communication system.

Notes and References

1. Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977). See also Chandler's *Strategy and Structure* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1962).

2. The development of telegraph and telephone earlier in the nineteenth century, of course, also had a major effect on business communication, but here I restrict myself to technological innovations directly relating to written communication.

3. I am concerned here primarily with correspondence, whether external (letters) or internal (what we would call memoranda and reports); I will not consider financial records, order forms, personnel records, etc.

4. Lucile B. Slayton, Chief Records Management Analyst for the Shaw-Walker Company (a major producer of filing equipment) identifies the critical period as extending from 1895 to 1918. "From Roll-top desks to Centralized Filing," *Office Executive* 34 (September 1959), 17. As I shall discuss, however, there were signs of the coming change before 1895.

5. The archives of the Scovill Manufacturing Company are housed in Baker Library at Harvard Business School. I am indebted to Scovill and to Florence

Bartosheshky, Librarian of Manuscripts and Archives, for permitting me to quote from these materials.

6. The information in this historical sketch comes from various informal and formal histories in the Scovill archives as well as indirectly from the documents themselves. Three historical sources are most prominent: various informal documents written by company historian E. H. Davis; Theodore F. Marburg's doctoral dissertation, *Management Problems and Procedures of a Manufacturing Enterprise, 1802-1852: A Case Study of the Origin of the Scovill Manufacturing Company*, Clark University, 1945; and an unpublished manuscript history by P.W. Bishop.

7. E. A. Cope, *Filing Systems: Their Principles and Their Application to Modern Office Requirements* (London and New York: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, Ltd., [1913]), p. 1.

8. This point is also made by Margaret A. Lennig, *Filing Methods: A Textbook on the Filing and Indexing of Commercial and Governmental Records* (n.p., 1920), pp. 9-10.

9. M. L. Sperry, as quoted by Bishop manuscript, p. 205.

10. An advertisement for R. Hoe & Co. copying presses, found in an 1838 copy book, described the process as follows: "For Copying in the Book, lay a sheet of oiled paper under the sheet on which you intend to take the Copy, dip the brush in water and dampen the leaf, take off the surplus water with blotting paper, turn the leaf over and dry the other side likewise, then lay the letter in the book, turn the damp sheet on the letter, and lay a sheet of oiled paper on that, close the book, and put it in the Press." See William D. Wigent, Burton D. Housel, and E. Harry Gilman, *Modern Filing: A Textbook on Office Systems* (Rochester, NY: Yawman and Erbe Mfg. Co., 1916), pp. 53-55, for another detailed description of the process.

11. Bishop manuscript, p. 70.

12. For discussions of these methods, see David W. Duffield, compiler, *Progressive Indexing and Filing for Schools* (Tonawanda, NY: Rand Kardex Bureau for Library Bureau, 1926), p. 9; Slayton, pp. 17-18; and James B. Griffith, *Correspondence and Filing*, Instruction Paper, American School of Correspondence (Chicago, 1909), pp. 28-30.

13. Chandler, *Visible Hand*, Part II.

14. Exact dates for each press book are listed in Baker Library's inventory of the Scovill Collection.

15. December 26, 1913, Mr. Rubino to Mr. Riggs, New York store press book.

16. Chandler goes on to trace the evolution from departmental structure to multi-unit divisional structure. That extra step is not crucial to my topic, however.

17. Cope, p. 4.

18. Griffith, *Correspondence and Filing*, p. 7.

19. Chandler, pp. 272-79.

20. Published in New York and Chicago, pp. 7-8.

21. For various descriptions of the development of flat or horizontal files, see the following sources: Duffield, pp. 10-11; E. R. Hudders, *Indexing and Filing: A Manual of Standard Practice* (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1916), pp. iii-iv; William Henry Williams, *Railroad Correspondence File*, rev. and supplemented by John L. Hanna (New York: The Devinne-Hallenbeck Company, Inc., 1902, 1910), pp. 7-8; and Lennig, p. 19. Lennig asserts that the flat file in drawers preceded the box file, but the other sources all agree on the opposite order. Lennig's book, apparently published by the author herself and very carelessly assembled and edited, seems less reliable.

22. Hudders, p. 3.
23. "Amberg's System of Letter Filing," a catalogue of Cameron, Amberg and Company's offerings in 1881.
24. Duffield, pp. 10-11.
25. Duffield, pp. 10
26. February 17, 1948, P. W. Bishop to Frank Kean, "Instructions to Frank Kean re Spoon Shop Material."
27. Williams, p. 8.
28. The first edition of Williams' *Railroad Correspondence File*, according to Loree's introduction, offered the system to other railroads.
29. Robert Cross, "Correspondence Filing," *Railroad Age Gazette* 56:20 (May 15, 1914), p. 1075.
30. Lennig, p. 19; Duffield, p. 11.
31. For descriptions of these methods, see Wigent, pp. 55-58; Griffith, *Correspondence and Filing*, pp. 13-17; and Duffield, pp. 14-15.
32. Wigent, pp. 55-57.
33. Duffield includes both as "modern" methods of copying, though he calls carbon copying "the very latest and most efficient method of making copies of outgoing correspondence," p. 14.
34. E. F. Carter, ed., *Dictionary of Inventions and Discoveries* (New York: Crane, Russak and Company, Inc., 1974).
35. Griffith, in *Correspondence and Filing*, asserts that vertical filing developed from the railroads' method of attaching related correspondence to a backing sheet, then folding and filing the packet vertically. Other contemporary sources attribute the development to library practices, however. Griffith's theory seems especially unlikely since by this period the railroads had generally abandoned bundling methods for flat file cabinets.
36. For these accounts, see Duffield, p. 11; *Vertical Filing*, a pamphlet put out by Library Bureau in 1917 and 1918; and Professor George de Leneer, *An Outline of Business Systems Invented by Library Bureau, Boston, U.S.A. and Selected for High School of Commerce, Brussels University* (Boston, Library Bureau, 1904), p. 1. Without naming Library Bureau, Cope and Hudders confirm the library influence and the approximate chronology of the development of card files, then vertical filing of papers.
37. Duffield, p. 11.
38. Hudders, p. iv.
39. Blanche Baird Shelp, *Office Methods*, Practical Bibliographies (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1918), p. 3.
40. James N. McCord, *A Textbook of Filing*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1920), p. vii.
41. See, for example, Parsons, p. 35 + .
42. See, for example, Lennig, pp. 56-57.
43. See, Griffith, *Correspondence and Filing*, pp. 32-38 for a discussion of all four methods.
44. Cross, p. 1075.
45. See, for example, Griffith, ed. *Systematizing*, 2 vol. (Detroit: The Book-Keeper Press for the International Accountants' Society, Inc., 1905), pp. 402-403.
46. Interestingly, this document is the earliest document appearing in the vertical office files of a manager in the Mills Department.
47. Cope, p. 14.
48. E. O. Goss to Mr. Twining, December 31, 1913.

49. March 8, 1920, J. H. Goss to A. J. Wolff.
50. *Harvard Business Review* 59 (September/October 1981), p. 214.

The Historical and Cultural Significance of Direct-mail Fund-raising Letters

John Pauly
University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee

Anyone who has a mailbox can testify to the ubiquity of direct mail. Each day virtually every middle-class adult receives at least one or two letters soliciting political support, offering a new magazine, selling plastic shoes, or touting the latest product of the Franklin Mint. Yet direct mail, like the industrial film, is a form of mass communication that typically escapes critical scrutiny. Those who concern themselves with it are usually practitioners. Marketers compare direct mail as an advertising medium to other media and busy themselves with the mysteries of compiling and maintaining mailing lists. Writers, teachers, and students of business communication study it simply as one more type of persuasive message. But no one has ever fully assessed direct mail's significance as a form of communication that emerged from a particular historical and cultural context.

I want to do just that, or at least to make a modest start of it. To make the analysis manageable, I will discuss only one "genre" of direct mail: the fund-raising letter. My essay will not attempt to weigh the pros and cons of direct mail as a fund-raising technique or offer hints on how to write more effective letters. Instead I will try to explain direct mail fund-raising letters as symbolic products—that is, as writers' attempts to create and to celebrate with an audience models of reality and worlds of imagination.[1] I will base my explanation on a careful analysis of a number of fund-raising letters that I have collected over the past several years with the help of my patient, though somewhat baffled, friends.

Beyond offering an interpretation of fund-raising letters, however, I also hope to unearth the deeper sociological roots of all advertising writing. The main question I want to pose is this: what is the historical significance of the fact that so many recent American attempts to influence politics, improve the plight of the unfortunate, and uplift the world have been financed by direct mail appeals, and that the groups who make these appeals comprise people who have never met each other except by their shared participation in one or

another medium of mass communication? The answer to that question will tell us something not only about direct mail advertising, but also about the character of American life and American institutions in our age.

The Shift in the Basis of Community Life

As a form of communication direct mail is both a product and a producer of modernity. A series of economic and technological changes, such as the improvement of printing technologies, the expansion of railroad systems, and the growth of national manufacturers, gave birth to it as well as to other forms of mass communication in the 19th century. But direct mail, in turn, helped promote economic and technological change and alter traditional styles of thought and behavior. It is this second role—as a form of mass communication that has bound human groups in new ways—that we must analyze.

In the 19th century the United States and Europe underwent profound changes in the structure of community life. Historians and sociologists have generally characterized these changes as a shift from face-to-face rural communities organized around tradition and sentiment to anonymous urban communities organized around scientific knowledge and rational interest. A series of European thinkers at the turn of the century created pairs of opposed ideal types to describe this shift, and social theorists today still rely heavily on their insights. But whether we use Ferdinand Tönnies' *gemeinschaft* versus *gesellschaft*, Sir Henry Maine's *status* versus *contract*, Emile Durkheim's *mechanical* versus *organic* forms of solidarity, or Max Weber's *traditional* versus *legal-rational* forms of authority, the analysis is the same.[2] Everywhere, these men said, but especially in the cities, people were discarding customary ways of life. Occupational and professional groups were replacing the family, church, and village as the foundations of society. In the new social order everything was in flux. Individual identity—certain though restricted in the older worlds—became problematic even as the new order offered a plethora of identities. Many observers thought that the new city dwellers suffered from an alienation and nervousness almost unknown in traditional villages and towns.

In America mass communications helped create and sustain these new forms of community life. By tying people to what Daniel Boorstin has called "everywhere communities," mass communications eliminated the smaller local worlds controlled by traditional authority.[3] The railroads, telegraph, newspapers, and advertising increasingly drew all Americans into invisible national communities of people who, though they might never see each other, nevertheless shared certain interests. The growth of a national economy and the beginnings of a national currency after the Civil War accelerated this

movement. An impersonal, abstract device, money cut across the old social boundaries, and cash gradually replaced customary status as a requirement for participation in almost all arenas of life.[4]

As middle-class Americans sloughed off the individual identities given them by family, village, and religion, they found that they could create new identities by their purchases. Daniel Boorstin has labeled the new groups that came to be organized around buying and selling "consumption communities."[5] The members of these consumption communities, linked in what Randall Jarrell once called "the great chain of buying," began to use money as a currency for symbolic expression. After the Civil War, first in the cities but eventually everywhere, Americans purchased nationally advertised brands of merchandise not just for their economy or utility, but for the status that those goods conferred. In our own age we need not look far for an example of this behavior. We all know some lost soul who was a political activist one year, a Hare Krishna the next, a vegetarian the next, and a backpacker the next, and who, perhaps, capped his whirlwind career with a stint in an MBA program. Because each of these identities is based upon a pattern of purchase and because none of these roles offers any hereditary or customary restrictions to entrance, one role quickly follows another. Thus a man's decision to dramatize himself as the American Gigolo or the Concerned Environmentalist or the Tough-Minded Political Realist often involves little more than a change in the contents of his shopping cart.

At the moment that buying and selling became the chief means of creating an individual identity in a mobile, commercial society, advertising became more valuable as a form of knowledge about the world. In more stable worlds, elders, parents, teachers, and clergy had eased young men and women into their roles in the community. Now consumer advertising assumed that responsibility: it began to "coach" young and old alike in how to create identities with their purchases.[6] Advertising had not always performed that role; until the mid-19th century most advertising had simply been a way of making known the availability of a product or a service.[7] Like the shopkeeper's sign, the early advertisement was generally a short, factual appeal, often in the form of a "business card"—a small, rectangular box that gave the name and address of the business and the line of goods carried. The business card advertisement was much like a map, in that it merely extended the factual geographic and economic knowledge already possessed by community dwellers and visitors.

We might chart the changing relation of advertising to community life in another way: by marking the changing role of salesmen in the new economy. Before the presold national brand appeared, salesmanship had been far more important than advertising. Two types of sales transactions had characterized the wholesale business throughout most of the 19th century. Up to mid-

century country merchants would generally travel to fairs and city markets to buy their supplies; after that point the growth of the railroad allowed traveling representatives of city wholesalers to visit the country. In both cases, however, successful selling required the cultivation of personal relations, and a community's conventional standards of behavior governed the ethics of persuasion a salesman could use.[8] Although advertising eventually confounded these traditional standards of propriety, it too was originally constrained by them. Not until the penny press of the 1830s did consumer advertising begin to throw off the old moral restrictions that dictated both the types of items that could be advertised and the style of typographic display.[9] Before the Civil War advertising played only a minor role in business, and face-to-face transactions remained the norm.[10]

Traveling salesmen did their part in creating a national market for manufacturers, but the success of that national market ultimately elbowed the salesman into a minor role in American business. National manufacturers soon found that advertising a brand-name product could make their marketing more capital intensive and certain; a clever copywriter who could create a rapport with customers and dramatize a purchase could do the job of dozens of salesmen. Thus loyalties to nationally advertised brands—one of the few "traditions" of modern life—replaced the personal loyalties merchants felt toward particular salesmen or wholesalers, and because more and more merchandise was presold, salesmen themselves became mere functionaries. They still closed deals, but they did less and less actual selling.[11]

As national businesses that advertised presold brands came to dominate the American economy, the relations between businessmen and customers grew more impersonal. Salesmen had formerly built their knowledge of customers on intuitive understandings of individual customers' idiosyncrasies. Even early advertising copywriters stressed that advertising was a knack, an art acquired through diligent practice and slow maturation.[12] But a slowly acquired knowledge of individual customers was impossible in the new, impersonal markets, so businessmen turned to science for quick descriptions of the behavior of masses of people. Advertisers, often in league with psychological researchers, tried to uncover universal human needs that they could play upon in order to sell products.[13] The search for scientific understanding of mass behavior (which we call marketing) and for automatic techniques of writing (which we call business writing) had begun.

With this understanding of the economic and sociological character of advertising, we can now venture a definition of direct mail as a symbolic form: direct mail letters are the literature of modern consumption communities. Just as the novel was a literary form that dramatized the ethos of the 18th and 19th century bourgeoisie, so direct mail—like other advertising—dramatizes the possibilities of consumption in industrial societies. (We might even claim

that dramatic advertising is one of the distinctively American contributions to world literature.) The consumption communities whose values direct mail celebrates comprise middle-class people who often have few ties to stable geographic worlds or to traditional patterns of thought, behavior, or feeling. The older bourgeois worlds portrayed in the novel were often set in the city, but these modern worlds of consumption have no particular location in space. For the most part they exist in the mass media alone. Essentially direct mail letters invite readers to use their money to participate symbolically in a distinctively modern form of community life: the purchase, along with many others, of a mass-produced object, service, or ideology.

The Democratization of Philanthropy

If we are to understand the particular traits of direct mail fund-raising letters, we must now add a brief description of how American philanthropy has changed over the past 100 years. Although charity is a very old human tradition, systematic fund raising did not become a common feature of American life until the late 19th century. For the first half of that century, as for all previous history, charity was thought to be mainly an obligation of the wealthy. But the ascendancy of middle-class life in every domain democratized philanthropy as well. Originally this democratization had religious roots, and Americans' enthusiasm for philanthropy ebbed and flowed with the tides of social reform and religious revivalism. Indeed one writer has suggested that the Great Awakening of the mid-18th century was the first American social movement to make available the sentiments of piety and benevolence to the masses.[14] Besides being predisposed to occasional fits of mass piety, Americans also loved to organize voluntary associations, for they felt that such groups epitomized the spirit of individual freedom upon which the country had been founded. Thus Americans had banded together of their own accord to offer relief after natural disasters such as the Boston fire of 1760, to promote sectarian colleges, abolition, and prison reform, and to launch far-ranging missionary activities in the West and in the urban slums.

By the end of the 19th century, American reformers had taken a new direction. Sensing that modern problems were too complex for traditional methods of charity to handle, they sought ways to make philanthropy more scientific, systematic, democratic, and efficient. They strove to create more rational and impersonal charitable organizations and to eliminate the extravagance and waste that were part of the older systems of giving.[15] Most historians consider Charles S. Ward and Lyman Pierce the fathers of the modern financial campaign. As YMCA secretaries in the 1890s, they raised money for YMCA buildings by using highly publicized campaigns conducted by personal solicitors in a limited time. Their efforts, together with the

success of wartime fund raising for Liberty Bonds and the Red Cross, helped make fund raising a professional occupation by the 1920s.[16]

Fund raisers have always used letters to prospective donors, but such letters have not always enjoyed the high reputation that they possess today. Urban charities had regularly used "begging" letters to solicit support from the wealthy, but many professional fund raisers have always disdained such impersonal appeals and have considered letters as, at best, a last resort.[17] As late as 1954 the eminent fund-raiser John Price Jones could say that

> Some mail appeals are legitimate, dignified, and reflective, but the majority only serve to show the unwillingness of fund-raising groups to face up to the primary reality of fund-raising—that selective personal solicitation is by far the best method of approach to a prospective donor.[18]

In his history of American fund raising, Scott Cutlip quotes Charles Ward's dictum that anyone who could be persuaded by a letter to donate money to an unknown charity must be a member of the "Easy Mark Lodge." Noting the continuing use and success of direct-mail fund raising today, Cutlip remarks that, as in 1926, "Easy Mark Lodge still has a large membership."[19] We shall return in the last section of this essay to try to account more fully for the significance of Americans' openness to impersonal appeals of all sorts.

Beyond professional squabbles over methods, there were other reasons for fund-raising letters' bad reputation. Though direct mail enticed charitable groups with its promise of enormous returns for minimum effort, the medium's high cost often made fund-raising letters a dangerous and costly proposition.[20] Because it combined anonymity with the possibility of large rakeoffs, direct mail also appealed to the sleaziest of charity racketeers and charlatans, and direct mail as a medium acquired a bad name as a result.[21] But at least some of the resistance to direct mail appeals was due to their impersonality and to charities' free-wheeling barter of lists of prospects. Cutlip tells the story of one well-to-do donor who, though she had asked to remain anonymous, found that her name had been traded to dozens of other charities. To such donors, open commerce in mailing lists seemed crass; the exchange of "prospects" degraded the act of giving by depersonalizing the relation between the donor and an individual charity. To at least some older donors, fund-raising letters were an unwelcome annoyance, an unpleasant example of crude modern manners.[22]

Yet the value of direct mail techniques to fund raisers has been undeniable. Although personal solicitation might be more profitable for some groups, the sheer proliferation of charities has made the fund-raising letter a natural choice for that vast majority of groups that cannot stage more elaborate campaigns.[23] Moreover, this proliferation, and the increased competition for donations that has accompanied it, has accentuated one of direct mail's true advantages: its unparalleled ability to segment a large, impersonal

audience.[24] Careful cross-checking of different mailing lists can produce custom-tailored lists of prospects who are most likely to contribute to a particular charity. Just as manufacturers can use sales letters to position their products in a market, fund raisers can use direct-mail letters to position their charities in the audience's cultural and imaginative landscape. Given its technical advantages and the sheer number of charities today, along with the increasing number of activist organizations that are also seeking help, direct mail is likely to remain a widely used medium for the foreseeable future.

The Nature of Fund-raising Letters

The essential features of fund-raising letters should now be clear. Although all advertising, like most news, features worlds of transient experience, the imaginative worlds offered by fund-raising letters are particularly ephemeral. Readers receive no product in return for their money (save for an occasional newsletter, which itself is merely another ephemeral imaginative world). The actual physical location or existence of the letter's sponsor is irrelevant (Who, for example, ever cares to visit the headquarters of the Friends of the Earth?). Most modern fund-raising groups exist almost entirely in the mass media—in newsletters, brochures, and fund-raising letters, in television interviews with group leaders, and in newspaper accounts of group activities such as lawsuits and Congressional testimony. The essential symbolic purpose of a fund-raising letter is to dramatize public events, celebrities, and ideologies. The letter unites members of the group by identifying the warring forces of good and evil and enlisting the reader's participation in the battle. The act of giving money to the group acquires a particular symbolic interpretation in the letter: it is a call to arms, a celebration, a last-ditch stand, a fight against impossible odds, or a handshake of brotherhood. To donate money is to subscribe to a set of meanings and interpretations of experience. Just as money gave the 19th-century consumer access to a national market of goods, so it has given the 20th-century consumer access to a national market of utopias, moral panaceas, and would-be revolutions.

A close reading of contemporary direct-mail fund-raising letters bears out this analysis. If we read these letters as a form of symbolic action, we find that virtually all contemporary fund-raising letters cast their appeals in a similar dramatic form. I want to highlight three key structural elements of this form—the salutation, the central story or metaphor, and the exclusive appeal—because these three elements give the contemporary fund-raising letter its particular character as a form of modern imagination. Once again, my interest is not in what makes a good or a bad letter, but in how we ought to understand direct-mail letters as a symbolic model of experience.

The Salutation. The name given to the mass audience of a fund-raising letter is crucial, for it tells that audience's members how they are to think of themselves.[25] In the older world of business, the merchant and the customer met each other in a taken-for-granted social world in which the roles and relative status of each party were clear. In the world of modern advertising nothing is clear or permanent; the audience's allegiances are not to fixed social worlds but to the fleeting worlds of individual imagination. In a world of rapidly changing fashions and multiple identities, the salutation tells readers which "hat" they are to wear.

Sometimes the salutation reconstructs a concrete social world, as when a fund-raising letter from a sorority begins "Dear Sister." Sometimes the salutation can be offbeat or clever in creating an imaginative identity: a recent Jacques Cousteau Society letter, which argued the importance of the ocean to all humans, addressed the reader as "Dear Citizen of the Water Planet." But perhaps the most common form of address is "Dear Friend." *Friend* is probably used so much because it is a handy, vague, gender-neutral word that sounds more personal than *Sir* or *Madam*. Yet there is something uncomfortably promiscuous about it. That salutation once signified a special relationship between two people; its frequent use by utter strangers today typifies the studied informality with which modern Americans enter impersonal social relationships.

The Central Story or Metaphor. Fund-raising letters today spend an enormous amount of time weaving long and somewhat complex stories. Four-page letters are common, especially from advocacy groups, and although no precise figures are available, today's letters seem generally longer than those used 20 or 30 years ago. For instance, in their 1950 book *How to Raise Funds by Mail*, Margaret Fellows and Stella Koenig gave 21 examples of fund-raising letters. Of the 21, 20 were one-page long (the other was two pages), and some of these one-page letters were less than 200 words. The ultimate explanation of today's longer letters must be that longer letters test better, but why that should be so is unclear. I suspect that longer letters may be more common to groups that are new or have widely dispersed constituencies. Since no one will be going door to door to follow up on the campaigns of the National Rifle Association, Amnesty International, or the Southern Poverty Law Center, the letter must tell the whole story.

Beyond being an effective attention-getter, the story approach creates a central symbolic drama in which the reader is offered a prospective role. Thus a letter from the Disabled American Veterans tells the story of a combat patrol whose leader is gunned down. The letter asks readers to imagine themselves as members of that patrol. Giving money to the organization is dramatized as an act of courage; in effect, the reader is "crawling into the brush" to rescue his buddy. We could find this same dramatic structure in

almost any contemporary fund-raising letter. An enormously successful letter from the 1972 Nixon campaign, for example, asked readers to stand up for the American "way of life," which was being threatened by George McGovern's radical proposals; a Wallace campaign letter of that same year asked readers to help Wallace "send a message to the liberals and bureaucrats in Washington, D.C." Sometimes the stories are quite elaborate. A Jacques Cousteau Society letter of a few years ago told a story about a European aquarium's attempt to create artificial seawater for a collection of rare species. The attempt was unsuccessful until a little real seawater was added to the man-made water. Then the creatures flourished. The story's theme was that each molecule of water in the ocean contains a miraculous "spark of life" that no human science can duplicate, and the letter's appeal—protect the oceans and "stand up for life"' by supporting the Jacques Cousteau Society—grew quite naturally out of this story.

To varying degrees all fund-raising letters traffic in abstract symbolic causes. Nineteenth-century philanthropists, who lived in more concrete and stable social worlds, could see their donations feed a child or raise a library or museum. But in what shadowy domain can the modern donor watch his donation assert and sustain a "way of life"? Modern donations mostly support activities in the ephemeral imaginative worlds created by mass communications. This separation of donor and recipient has created a disjunction of rhetorical form and political substance in many modern fund-raising appeals. Though the groups that solicit money by mail may portray themselves as defenders of traditional values, it is clear that such groups are themselves the agents of modernity. Charities, lobby groups, and citizens' advocates—composed of scientists, doctors, lawyers, accountants, professors, ecologists, and other professionals—can hardly be considered the defenders of custom and the common person. Indeed, as our opening discussion of social theory suggested, it is precisely the rise of these types of groups (and the bureaucratic institutions they control and the nationally based styles of life they create) that has historically undermined the traditional values that they now seek to preserve. The friendly, personal voice of today's fund-raising letter lulls us into ignoring the true character of the act requested by the letter: the transfer of an impersonal commodity to a bureaucracy in the name of an abstract ideology.

A perfect example of this disjunction of form and substance is the Jacques Cousteau letter from 1974 that I cited above. As a piece of writing this letter is magnificent; its rhythm, word choice, and structure compare favorably with that of much contemporary fiction and reporting. But the letter also illustrates how charitable groups today cash in on the older forms of culture to legitimize their activities. In his letter the writer often uses phrases such as "blessed miracle of life" and "invisible spark" to attach a religious connotation

to the cause of ecology. He personifies the oceans, speaking of their receiving a "mortal wound" and of having their bottoms "raped" by trawlers. His purpose in using these techniques is to make the reader identify with the oceans and nature and to affirm the brotherhood of all life. In a masterful stroke, the writer identifies humanly constructed institutions as nonlife: "Governments, foundations and corporations, after all, do not have to breathe. We do."

This is a deeply moving letter, but we ought to examine it carefully even if we agree with its beautifully enunciated philosophy of the unity of all life. The letter, after all, is an elaborately contrived ruse for separating us from our money in the shortest possible time. It offers us a view of the world that Americans have always found stirring: the little real people against the Big Foundations, Big Corporations, and the Big Government. The letter asks for no permanent change in our behavior and thought, as have traditional writers on ecology from Henry David Thoreau to John Muir to Loren Eiseley. Instead the letter tries to tidy up the uncontrollable mess that is modern politics and make it seem simple just long enough to cadge some money out of us. With a few strokes of the pen we can appoint Jacques Cousteau our champion, send him out to do battle for us, and sit back and wait for the television specials to start rolling in.

This offer of a clean, direct, quick way to attack the world's problems, restore morality and—in the process—create coherent identities for ourselves seems to me the essence of the fund-raising letter's appeal.

The Exclusive Appeal. There is another paradox implicit in direct mail, as well as in all modern advertising: it urges the reader to express his individuality by taking an action that will also be taken by thousands or even millions of others. Letter writers frequently portray any donation made as an act of individual courage. A recent letter on behalf of Edward Kennedy, for example, calls for those few citizens who "feel their social responsibilities especially keenly" to support his candidacy. By responding the reader will presumably distinguish himself from the mass of irresponsible and unconcerned Americans. Sometimes the writer will cynically capitalize on the low return rate characteristic of direct mail as a medium to arouse the reader's guilt. The Disabled Veterans letter cited above, for example, claims in astonishment that most of the people who read the letter will ignore its appeal for help, that most readers will, in effect, callously desert their fellow Americans and leave them to die out in the brush. None of us is so naive as not to recognize the obvious chicanery of such appeals, but we ought not underestimate our own susceptibility to these modern calls for action. When we give money to Save the Whales or Preserve the Right to Bear Arms, we really do feel as though we are engaged in an exclusive cause that others are too ignorant or callow to acknowledge. We feel as though we have performed an act that benefits not only ourselves but the public as a whole.

These conclusions about direct-mail fund-raising letters are admittedly based on a relatively small number of recent letters. A more thorough analysis of direct mail as a symbolic form would require a careful reading of many letters written over a longer period. Such an enormous project would not disprove, I think, any of the conclusions above, but it would show how the rhetorics used by bureaucratic groups to legitimize their activities change over time. One example that I stumbled across a few years ago will illustrate the potential value of such a study. Up until 1967 or so, letters from Father Flanagan's Boys Town portrayed that organization as a surrogate home, a place that provided a clean bed, hot meals, and moral guidance for homeless boys. Those early letters, which arrived at Christmastime, drew upon the traditional Catholic rhetoric of home, family, and community as the foundation for responsible adult life. But a number of changes—the death of Boys Town's long-time fund raiser, the widely publicized allegations of financial mismanagement, and, most importantly, the drying up of the pool of homeless boys—caused Boys Town to recast its appeal. Like any bureaucratic organization that outlives its original purpose, Boys Town had to devise a new rationale to justify its existence. The model it chose was that of the contemporary socially responsible, therapeutic institution. Now Boys Town, according to its letters, helps boys and girls who have learning disabilities to realize their potential. Within the compass of a few letters, spread over a decade or so, is thus written a brief but revealing history of an American institution in a turbulent age.

The Significance of Direct-mail Fund-raising Letters

If my analysis of direct-mail fund-raising letters has been critical, it is not because I view such letters and the people who write them as villains hell-bent on destroying American values. I am not trying (as one recent cartoon character did) to solicit your contributions to finance a Stamp Out Junk Mail campaign. Rather what alarms me is the casualness and apparent cynicism with which Americans today accept these personalized impersonal calls to action. What does the increasing success of direct mail as a way of financing political and charitable activity tell us about ourselves and our institutions? The answer, I believe, has two parts: one economic, the other cultural. Both parts, however, lead us back to the critique of modernity with which we began this essay.

Many reform-minded Americans have always thought that the problem with all advertising, including direct mail, has been its reliance on irrational or emotional appeals rather than hard facts and self interest. This line of argument, I suggest, is unprofitable and often amounts to little more than a

gut-level preference that reformers have for one style of bureaucratic imagination—that of the hard-nosed journalist or the dispassionate academic researcher—over that of the advertiser. A more interesting and telling line of criticism was offered several years ago by a Swedish economist named Staffan Linder in a provocative book called *The Harried Leisure Class*. In this book Linder argued that modern life's claim to increase leisure by increasing work productivity is false. Almost all modern economists err, Linder said, by not recognizing that consumption goods cannot be consumed or maintained instantly. It takes time to live the goods life. Linder showed that increasing productivity ultimately must create a scarcity of time by making both work and leisure time more valuable. And the more valuable time is and the more hectic consumption gets, the more harried life as a whole must become.

Linder's argument allows us to see advertising in a novel way. In a system in which time is money, Linder argued, a "rationale of growing irrationality" must apply to economic decisions; that is, it becomes irrational to spend too much time considering the purchases we make because this time could be more profitably expended on other activities. Modern advertising, in this view, is a system of knowledge perfectly adapted to the conditions of modern life. Advertising offers the sketchy, superficial knowledge of products that harried modern people need to make rapid decisions. In this topsy-turvy world, impulsive purchasing is rational economic behavior.[26]

Clearly direct mail is a perfect example of such modern advertising, for it gives us only the sketchiest idea of what a product or service is or does. At best we see only pictures of the object offered, and in a fund-raising letter we may not even get that. Furthermore, if we apply Linder's Veblenesque critique to fund-raising letters, we come to a troubling conclusion: that modern people, strapped for time but with plenty of disposable income with which to pay for the maintenance of their consumption goods or replace worn goods, choose to spend less and less of their own time maintaining cultural traditions and values. Too busy to preserve customs, to care for our wounded and crippled, or support democracy, we are willing and anxious to pay bureaucratic institutions to do the job for us.

This theme—that the very pace of modern life must finally undermine any substantial, stable culture—ought to be familiar to anyone who has read the work of "conservative" social critics over the last century. We could readily find the theme in the work of the European sociologists discussed at the beginning of this essay, or in critics of modern life from Alexis de Tocqueville to T. S. Eliot and H. L. Mencken. No matter whose formulation we use, the conclusion is more or less the same: modern life seems to grow inexorably more transient and superficial as all vestiges of traditional authority and all ties to local communities wither away.

Now direct mail is hardly responsible for all of these changes. In one sense direct-mail fund-raising letters are merely the latest attempt by professional fund raisers to bureaucratize charity. We might dismiss their concoction of symbolic dramas in the name of charity as an amusing game or mere foolishness—at best the efforts of misguided moralists, at worst the acts of venal cynics. But in another sense these letters display the shape of modern life in alarmingly sharp relief. The dramas offered in fund-raising letters—as well as those of television, radio, advertising, newspapers, and public relations—indulge Americans' propensity for moral posturing and feverish action, but the bureaucratic institutions and impersonal forms of communication they foster make any moral life, as it has been traditionally conceived, impossible.

Notes and References

1. For a more complete discussion of this way of looking at communication see my "The Case for a New Model of Business Communication," *The Journal of Business Communication*, 14:4 (Summer 1977), pp. 11-23.

2. Leon Bramson, *The Political Context of Sociology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 30-32.

3. Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans—the Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 2.

4. Hugh Duncan discusses money as a symbol of community life and as a form of transcendence in his *Communication and Social Order* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 347-369.

5. Boorstin, pp. 89-90.

6. I am using the term *coach* in the same way as Anselm Strauss has in his *Mirrors and Masks* (Berkeley, CA: The Sociology Press, 1969), pp. 109-18.

7. Daniel Boorstin briefly describes the etymology of the word *advertise* in his *Democracy and Its Discontents* (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 29-30.

8. Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1954), pp. 54-55.

9. See Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), pp. 18-20, on the penny press's attitude toward advertising, and Boorstin, *The Americans*, pp. 138-142, on changing styles of advertising typography.

10. The growth of commodity and stock exchanges in major cities at this time—with their heavy reliance on deals conducted by telegraph—probably provided an early model of a national, impersonal business market.

11. E. B. Weiss, *The Vanishing Salesman* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), pp. 17-36.

12. Quentin J. Schultze, "Advertising, Science, and Professionalism, 1885-1917," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1978, pp. 134-137.

13. Schultze, pp. 120-125.

14. Robert Bremner, *American Philanthropy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 21.

15. Bremner, p. 90.

16. Scott Cutlip, *Fund Raising in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1965), pp. 38-50.

17. Arnaud Marts, *Man's Concern for His Fellow-Man* (Geneva, NY: W. F. Humphrey Press, 1961), p. 24.

18. John Price Jones, *The American Giver* (New York: Inter-River Press, 1954), p. 47.

19. Cutlip, p. 331.

20. Irene Gerlinger, *Money Raising: How to Do It* (Los Angeles: Suttonhouse, 1938), p. 10.

21. Cutlip discusses "the cheats in fund raising" at length; many of these groups relied on direct-mail trickery. See pp. 441-473.

22. Cutlip, pp. 335-6.

23. Margaret Fellows and Stella Akulin Koenig, *How to Raise Funds by Mail* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), pp. v-vi.

24. For a discussion of direct mail's advantages, see Chaman L. Jain and Al Migliaro, *An Introduction to Direct Marketing* (New York: American Management Association, 1978), pp. 20-21.

25. See Strauss, pp. 15-30, for a discussion of the relation of names to individual identity. On the salutation of a fund-raising letter, see Fellows and Koenig, pp. 60-61.

26. Staffan Linder, *The Harried Leisure Class* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 70-74.

"Sir, This Will Never Do": Model Dunning Letters, 1592-1873

Kitty O. Locker
Ohio State University

"Letter-writers"—books giving model letters for use in "Friendly, affectionate, commercial, and complimentary correspondence," to quote a typical subtitle—enjoyed an enormous vogue from the Renaissance well into the twentieth century. Katharine Gee Hornbeak identified 239 titles in her "Bibliography of the English Letter-Writer, 1560-1800,"[1] and Harry B. Weiss cited 416 titles in "A Preliminary Check List of American Letter-Writers, 1698-1943."[2] The plethora of titles bears witness to the popularity of letter-writers, but the number of different books is far smaller than these numbers might lead one to expect: many of these titles are editions or plagiarisms of popular works.

Of the 33 letter-writers published in English between 1568 and 1897 which I have been able to examine, 20 contain "dunning" letters. The verb "to dun" ("to press repeatedly and persistently, to importune; *esp.* for money due") dates from 1626, according to *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*; the first letter to be labeled a "a dunning letter" appears in W. P.'s *A Flying Post* (1678).

Hornbeak claims that Nicholas Breton's *A Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters* (1602) "offers the first English model letters asking to borrow money and—logically enough—the first requesting repayment,"[3] and subsequent critics seem to have accepted her statement. However, a dunning letter appears a full decade earlier, in the second edition (1592) of Angel Day's *The English Secretary*, an edition which Hornbeak lists in her bibliography but does not appear to have read carefully. Model forms for bills of exchange (which are cast in letter format) and bills of debt appear even earlier, in J[ohn] B[rowne]'s *The Marchants* [sic] *Aviso* (1589). *The Marchants Aviso* is of special interest because the letters it contains are almost certainly real business letters,[4] but, perhaps because the letters are from a factor, or agent, to his master and friends, no collection letters are included.

Dunning letters appear in only one of the three sixteenth-century letter-writers I have examined, and in only two of the four letter-writers published in the seventeenth century. However, as Table 1 shows, examples of dunning letters appear in all but one of the eighteenth-century letter-writers and in 12 of the 20 books published in the nineteenth century.

TABLE 1
The Appearance of Dunning Letters
in Letter-Writers, 1568-1897

	Number containing Dunning Letters	Number without Dunning Letters
1569-1592	1	2
1602-1696	2	2
1741-1794	5	1
1804-1897	12	8

Note: This Table includes only the letter-writers which I have been able to examine, and only one edition of each letter-writer unless subsequent editions are substantially revised. Many letter-writers were reprinted without change, so the total number of letter-writers (and of dunning letters) is larger than these figures indicate.

Most of the letter-writers contain only one or two examples of dunning letters, but two eighteenth-century and four nineteenth-century books each contain three or more, with *Martine's Sensible Letter-Writer* (1866) and P. L. Simmonds' *The Commercial Letter Writer* (1873) each containing seven examples.

Since collection letters continue to be a staple in many college texts for business writing in the 1980's, it is interesting to note that dunning letters do not appear in two early textbooks: J. Willis Westlake's *How to Write Letters: A Manual of Correspondence* (1876), and H. T. Loomis' *Practical Letter Writing: A Text Book* (1897). Westlake does urge the reader to "see the excellent collection [of business letters, including duns] contained in Anderson's *Practical Mercantile Letter-Writer*,"[5] a book first published in 1836 and reprinted throughout the remainder of the century. (Westlake mistakes the title: William Anderson's book is *Practical Mercantile Correspondence*.)

The examples of dunning letters which appear in the letter-writers may be divided into three categories: modest and apologetic, comminatory and vituperative, and brisk and businesslike. Modest and apologetic letters, as my label implies, are strangely reluctant to ask for repayment and offer some excuse for doing so: the existence of a due date does not suffice. Letters in this category first appear in 1602. New letters in this category last appear in 1841, while earlier examples are reprinted as late as 1868. Comminatory letters

denounce the debtor and threaten punishment; vituperative letters seem to take pleasure in rehearsing the debtor's failings, of which the unpaid debt is only one example. The first dunning letter I have found is a comminatory letter of 1592. It is so labeled by its author. New examples of vituperative letters appear through 1812, while earlier examples are reprinted as late as 1854. Dunning letters which are brisk and businesslike are the only ones which sound at all like twentieth-century collection letters. Letters in this category run the gamut from the comparatively mild to harsh letters threatening legal action. They are shorter than letters in the first two categories. Mild letters request repayment simply because the debt is due; even harsh letters threatening legal action are succinct, noting that the debtor has not responded to earlier requests, but not attacking his morals or his character. Brisk and businesslike letters first appear in 1741. New examples appear as late as 1873, while earlier examples in this category are reprinted through 1890.

The Legal Context: Debt and Imprisonment for Debt[6]

The shadow of imprisonment for debt hung over debtors for most of the period under discussion here: imprisonment for debt was commonplace until 1869 in Britain and until the 1840's in the United States.

Certainly the threat of imprisonment was a horrific one. Prisons were crowded and unsanitary; prisoners had to pay rent for their rooms and provide their own beds, bedding, and clothing; they even had to pay for the prison to be cleaned and the walls whitewashed. The state did not provide medical care; "in case of Death," one warden noted, "the Bodies of the poor Prisoners are left in Prison for a day or two, to give their Friends an Opportunity of coming to take them away for Burial." Prisoners, who might have to spend several days with a corpse until they themselves paid for the burial, were less impressed by this generosity.[7]

Prisoners were not even given food. The Lords' Act of 1759 required a creditor who caused a debtor to be imprisoned to supply a subsistence level of grain (or its value in cash, set by law at 4 pence—a groat—a day) for the debtor's sustenance. Inflation made this sum wholly inadequate; in 1792, the head of Marshalsea Prison, the largest debtors' prison in London, admitted that at least double that amount was then needed to supply a prisoner's food.[8] Food for the individual prisoners was of course not enough. Most debtors were married and had children; about a third of these families lived in the prison too.[9] And of course the debtors needed money for rent, food, bedding, clothing, and laundry.

The requirement that the creditor pay a groat a day seems to have been enforced sporadically if at all. As Shirley Brown notes, when John Howard

examined the *State of the Prisons in England and Wales* (1780), he "found not one debtor in all England taking advantage of his 'Groats.' At Carlisle [Wales] he found that only one out of forty-nine had obtained his allowance, and, according to the jailer, who had been there fourteen years, no more than a total of five had ever received their money."[10] A House of Commons Committee in 1792 found that some 10 percent of the prisoners were receiving their "groats"; in some of these cases, the amount the creditor had paid in groats exceeded the amount of the debt for which the debtor had been imprisoned.[11] Fortunate debtors ate food which friends brought in (paying a fee to the jailer for the privilege); unfortunate ones ate "water soup, made from bread boiled in water."[12] In 1783 an allowance of 21 ounces of bread a day per debtor was introduced; this was reduced to 6 ounces a day in 1801 and finally raised to 14 ounces a day, plus two pounds of "clods and stickings" of beef a week, in 1817.[13]

Nor were overcrowding, disease, and semi-starvation the only horrors awaiting an imprisoned debtor: many debtors were tortured brutally in efforts to make them reveal the existence of assets which, it was assumed, they were concealing. Certainly there were cases where debtors chose to go to prison and pass their assets on to their heirs rather than paying their debts,[14] but the overwhelming majority of debtors were guilty not of fraud but merely of insolvency. (Private individuals were not allowed to declare themselves bankrupt until 1844,[15] and even after that date the temporarily insolvent were still imprisoned until 1869.)

Collection letters were not a necessary prelude to imprisoning one's debtor; indeed, the creditor was not required to give any notice at all, not even a statement of the amount due. As a commentator on British law noted in 1822,

> Where there is a debt owing, it is held that a creditor is not obliged to allege or prove any demand of payment before he brings his action; for bringing an action is technically said to be a sufficient request, for it is the debtor's duty to find out the creditor, and pay him his debt.[16]

It should be noted that this state of affairs applied only to debts, where one person owed money to another. A different situation existed for bills of exchange (documents much like today's checks; also called drafts), where one person required a second person to disburse a sum of money on his behalf to a third person. Bills of exchange had to be presented to the second person on the due date if one was specified or "within a reasonable time" if no date was specified. A grace period of three days was customary for bills due on a given date, but no grace period was allowed if the bill was due "on demand."[17] Even in the case of bills of exchange, however, it was necessary only that the bill be presented for payment; if it was not honored, no further attempts to collect it were legally necessary before a writ for imprisonment was issued.

A debtor was imprisoned immediately after the creditor sued for debt. The mesne process, under which those accused of crimes were imprisoned immediately, even though their trials had not yet taken place, was instituted in England in 1251 and not abolished until 1838. Sometimes it might not even be necessary for the creditor to bring a formal action: Walter Besant claims, "There were cases in which persons were arrested and taken to prison simply by asking a constable to take them there."[18] After the arrest, the creditor legally could wait up to seven months before filing a declaration, and up to a full year before bringing the suit to trial. During all this time, the alleged debtor was treated like other prisoners and had to pay all the necessary fees; if at the trial it was found that he did not owe the debt, he still had to pay various legal fees before he would be released from prison.[19] Most alleged debtors were in fact found guilty; the trial was a often mere formality, with the creditor entering a "fictional plea" of "guilty" on the debtor's behalf—an arrangement to which the debtor agreed as a condition for obtaining the original loan.[20]

The number of persons imprisoned for debt was high. Richard Ford states,

> During the eighteen months following the panic of 1825, there were 101,000 writs issued for the arrest of debtors in England. During the year 1829 there were 7,114 persons committed to jail in London for debt, and of these 1,545 were still imprisoned at the end of the year.[21]

The establishment of so-called county courts in 1846 further increased the number of imprisoned debtors: the new courts made it easier for the creditors to recover small debts, so they were more willing to make small loans—which in turn led to more delinquent debts.[22]

The legal situation in the United States was basically the same. In his analysis of unpaid "book debts" in Connecticut (debts which the creditor had recorded in his account book, but which were unsubstantiated by a signed instrument), Bruce Mann notes that writs issued for arrest routinely stated that the debt remained unpaid "though often requested," but the cases he cites do not specify that the requests were, or were required to be, made in writing.[23] Imprisonment for debt seems to have been just as common in the United States as it was in England: some 300 people a year were imprisoned for debt in Massachusetts as late as 1829; in the eleven years 1820-1830, the Suffolk County Jail of Boston housed 11,818 persons imprisoned for debt, an average of over 1,000 a year out of a population of 43,000 to 60,000 people.[24] Imprisonment for debt was abolished in New York in 1831, in Pennsylvania in 1842, and in Massachusetts in 1855, but there were a great many exceptions under which a "fraudulent" debtor could be imprisoned, and some 50,000 people in the United States were still imprisoned for debt each year before 1850. (Even today, fraudulent debtors or those in contempt of court may be imprisoned; failure to pay court-ordered child support is perhaps the best-known reason for imprisonment for debt in contemporary America.)

From the creditor's point of view, imprisoning a debtor was an inefficient way to obtain payment. The number of debtors who languished in jail for months or even years indicates that most of them simply were unable to pay their debts. And if a debtor was insolvent when he was imprisoned, he obviously could not earn enough to repay the debt while he was imprisoned. Once a creditor brought an action for debt, no judge could mandate the payment of a smaller amount either as a partial installment or in full settlement: "in an action of debt," according to the English legal authority William Blackstone, "the plaintiff must recover the whole debt he claims, or nothing at all."[26] One anonymous legal authority wrote in 1830 that "the remedy [of imprisonment for debt] appears an ineffectual or mistaken one;"[27] a century earlier another writer more plaintively noted that the law prescribing imprisonment "had in no wise answered the end desired."[28] Dunning letters were not legally necessary, but they appear to have been a reasonable and perhaps more efficacious alternative to issuing a writ for the debtor's arrest. Sending one or more dunning letters in no way limited the creditor's right to sue for debt: if letters failed, the creditor could still bring a legal action as a last resort.

Modest and Apologetic Letters: 1602-1841

Of all the dunning letters in the old letter-writers, the modest and apologetic duns seem the strangest to a twentieth-century reader. These letters ask for repayment not because the debt is due but because of the unexpected reverses or ill fortune which the creditor himself has suffered. These letters sometimes apologize explicitly for "this freedom, which nothing but a regard to my credit and family could oblige me to take;" they frequently indicate that a partial repayment will be "highly acceptable" if it is not convenient for the debtor to repay the whole sum; and they generally imply that the debtor is doing the creditor a favor by repaying the debt.

In *A Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters* (1602), Nicholas Breton offers two dunning letters, one of which falls into this first category. In "A Kinde letter of a Creditor for money," Breton works up to his request slowly. At the end of a long first sentence (92 words), the request has appeared only indirectly and in the subjunctive. Having once worked up to the point, however, Breton leaves no room for doubt, reiterating the request three more times in the last two sentences.

> Sir, I pray you take it not unkindly, that I write thus earnestly unto you: for more necessity than will hath urged me to it: my money is not so much, as you well able to discharge it: my losses by Sea and ill Creditors by land, make me strain courtesy with my Friends, for their help in an extremity, yet do I desire nothing but my due; but as I was ready to lend, I would be glad to receive with that fulness of good will,

that may continue our Kindness. I write this not as doubting your discretion, but to intreat your patience, if your purse be not in tune: for were I as I have been and hope to be, I could rather bear too long, than ask too soon, especially of so good a friend as I have always found of your self. Consider therefore my case, and in your kindness answer me. Time is precious, and therefore lest by disappointment I be disfurnished, and so perhaps discredited, I pray you, speed your answer: which, howsoever, shall be welcome: and therefore earnestly intreating you to help me now, that I may the better requite your kindness hereafter, with many thanks for your great favors, which cannot be forgotten to be deserved: I take my leave further at this time to trouble you, but will rest in what I shall be able ever to pleasure you, to make you know how much I love you,

Your loving friend, T. R.[29]

The next apologetic letter appears in W. P.'s *A Flying Post* (1678). W. P.'s letter is shorter than Breton's (161 words as compared to Breton's 249) but contains the same ideas and follows the same pattern of organization, though it repeats none of Breton's phrasing. The response to each letter is positive, though the good news is buried. W. P.'s response is notable for its resolve to send "all the money which I owe you, both interest and principal."[30] This is the first mention of the term "interest" in any of the letters about borrowing or repaying money in the books I have examined, although the 1592 letter quoted in the next section does refer to "charges and penalty" as components of the sum now owed.

The author of one of the most influential letter-writers of the eighteenth century is better known today as the father of the epistolary novel. Samuel Richardson's *Familiar Letters on Important Occasions* (1741) contains several dunning letters, one of which "modestly request[s] a Balance of Accounts." Like the seventeenth-century examples, it cites necessity as the reason for the request, but it is far more brisk and businesslike than its predecessors:

Sir,

I find myself constrained by a present exigence, to beg you to balance the account between us. Though matters have run into some length, yet I would not have applied to you, had I known so well how to answer my pressing occasions any other way. If it suits you not to pay the whole, I beg, sir, you will remit me as much towards it as you can, without prejudice to your own affairs; and it will extremely oblige

Your most humble Servant.[31]

In response, the reader sends £100 on account, and promises to send the rest "in a few days."[32]

Later authors of letter-writers evidently felt that Richardson's "modest" letter was not sufficiently apologetic. Richardson's basic pattern was varied in a number of ways, and many of the resulting letters were reprinted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century letter-writers. The single most durable letter seems to be Thomas Cooke's adaptation of Richardson's "modest"

letter in *The Universal Letter-Writer* (1771). Cooke strengthens the urgency of the plea by stating that the creditor's own credit is at stake and that he has no other means for obtaining the money. Richardson's creditor, in contrast, does not know "so well . . . any other way"; his statement is that applying to this debtor seems the best, but not necessarily the only, means of meeting his "present exigence." The apology is muted, almost a formality, in Richardson's letter; in Cooke's, the apology is explicit, and the writer assumes that a further oral elaboration "when I have an opportunity of seeing you" will be necessary to excuse the "freedom" of the request.

> Sir,
> Although the balance of the account between us has been of long standing in my favor, yet would I not have applied to you at present, had not a very unexpected demand been made upon me for a considerable sum, which without your assistance, is not in my power to answer. When I have an opportunity of seeing you I shall then inform you of the nature of this demand, and the necessity of my discharging it. I hope you will excuse me this freedom, which nothing but a regard to my credit and family could oblige me to take. If it does not suit you to remit the whole, part will be thankfully received by
> Your most humble Servant.[33]

The Universal Letter-Writer was reprinted, expanded, and plagiarized. Cooke's edition of 1819 reprints this letter without change; the last book in which I have found this letter copied *verbatim* is *A New Letter-Writer for the Use of Gentlemen*, which probably appeared in 1868.[34] But if some letter-writers continue to print unchanged the fulsome but apparently sincere apologies of Cooke's 1771 letter, other nineteenth-century letter-writers suggest that the apologetic dun was becoming an empty convention.

Only three new letters in this category appear in the nineteenth century. The example in *The Complete Letter-Writer* (1804),[35] like Cooke's letter, seems genuinely apologetic, but the other two do not. In the latter two, it is true that the creditor asks the reader to "excuse the liberty I take" in asking for repayment and cites his own need for the money, but both of these statements seem conventional. The tone is brisk, not apologetic; the creditor, in spite of the ritual apology, asks not for a favor but simply for what is his. The following example appeared in *The Modern Letter-Writer* (1812):

> Sir,
> Your bill for goods supplied last year, has now been delivered upwards of three months, and I have waited on you several times to solicit payment, but have not been so fortunate to find you at home; I have a very large sum to make up in the course of a week, and shall esteem it a very a particular favour, if you can let me have the amount of my bill delivered within that time; I trust you will excuse the liberty I take in writing to you on this subject, and believe me,
> Sir,
> Your most obedient humble servant.[36]

The response to this letter is the first I have seen in which the debtor does not return part or all of the money owed immediately. Instead, this debtor is polite but unhelpful:

> Sir,
> I am sorry you have had the trouble of calling so often for your money, and still more that it is not in my power to pay your bill within the time you mention; I am, at present, very short of cash, and shall be so for these six weeks; at the end of that time I will settle with you.
>
> I am, Sir,
> Your humble servant.[37]

The creditor's reply is peevish in tone but accepts the situation: "... the credit on your bill already exceeds by some months what it is usual in trade to give, and what I give my customers in general; I hope therefore you will not take it amiss, that I have drawn on you at six weeks for the amount of my demand. ..."[38] This brief lecture on the customs of trade is buffered by the apologies with which the letter opens and closes.

The last new example that I've seen in this category appeared in R. C. Austin's *The Commercial Letter-Writer; or A Series of Mercantile Precedents, designed as an Accompaniment to The Copy Book . . . for the Use of Schools & Private Tuition* (1841). Austin's subtitle suggests that the examples he gives may have been actual business letters. Certainly nineteenth-century writers and merchants assumed that one learned the principles of business correspondence by copying letters. The author of *The Young Clerk's Manual* advised, "it is very desirable that the novice should, for a time, be engaged in the occupation of copying. It will serve, better than any other practice, to initiate him into the forms and phraseology of commerce."[39] The supposition that Austin's examples are real business letters is further supported by the fact that his examples give the dates on which and the places from which the letters were sent, while the letter-writers with invented letters give nothing before the salutation. The apology in Austin's letter, even more than that of the example in *The Modern Letter-Writer*, is conventional; the second sentence of the letter indicates that the writer feels no real need to apologize for asking for the payment of a bill which is a full year overdue.

> 35, Strand, July 14th, 1840
>
> Sir,
>
> I trust you will excuse the freedom I am taking in applying to you for a settlement of your account, which, I see by my books, has been standing now nearly eighteen months. I must appeal to your candour to say, whether my application is premature or not, at the same time taking this opportunity to remind you, that when I engaged to perform the work, for which the inclosed is due, the understanding between us was, that the time of credit should not exceed six months.
>
> I have a heavy sum to make up by the 20th instant; your early compliance, therefore, with my request, either by cash or bill, whichever may be most convenient, will particularly oblige
>
> Yours, &c.[40]

Comminatory and Vituperative Letters: 1592-1812

Certainly the most entertaining duns in the old letter-writers are the comminatory and vituperative letters. There are fewer different examples in this category than in either of the others, and there is no evidence that any of them were really mailed, but the energy and inventiveness of their spleen make the businesslike letters seem pale by comparison.

The chiding, or vituperative, letter was a staple in the medieval Latin formularies and was retained and further subdivided in the English Elizabethan letter-writers. In *The English Secretary* (1586), Angel Day specifies thirty categories of letters, eight of which criticize, accuse, or threaten, and offers several examples of each. The most extreme of these categories is the comminatory letter, which, "participating with a kind of *Accusation* for injuries committed, . . . [and] protesting a due defect in the party challenged, menaceth thereupon a speedy and answerable revengement."[41] One of Day's examples is a dunning letter. It appeared in the second edition of *The English Secretary* (1592) and enjoys the distinction of being the first dunning letter to appear in an English letter-writer, and the first to threaten to arrest the debtor.

> Master D. I see well by some experience had of your dealings, that you have small regard of your honesty, or welfare, two things in mine opinion, whereof each one should be chary. Your honesty, in respect that you keep no promise: Your welfare, in that you neglect the opportunity, for releasement of that, which in the end must lie upon your own shoulders. But seeing your inconsideration is so great, and the like respect you carry of your own good grown to be slender, blame not other men that break with you upon desert, nor mislike at all their want of pity, that have no mean to pity yourself. For my part look for it, and you shall surely find it, that I will prosecute all means possible to arrest you, and being so arrested, I will not be moved with entreaty, prayer, or other submission to release you, till you have paid the whole debt, charges and penalty. And whereas you sent me word by my man, that you could not accustom yourself, with one that trusted you to deal treacherously, I answer again, that if you make it so nice to bring him forth to be arrested for whom you are surety: pay then the debt yourself, and satisfy me, and that speedily: for if you do not I vow I will meet with you and that very shortly, when to your little content you shall perceive that in so using me, you have dealt most unadvisedly. Think of it as you list, and deal with me accordingly: and so to your best consideration of your own safety, I leave you. This ninth of June, etc.[42]

After Day's letter, we must wait 150 years for the next example which falls clearly into this category: Samuel Richardson's example of a "more pressing and angry Letter":

> *Mr.* Barret,
>
> I am sorry your ill usage constrains me to write to you in the most pressing manner. Can you think it is possible to carry on business after the manner you act by me? You know what promises you have made me, and how from time to time you have broken them. And can I depend upon any new ones you make? If you use

others as you do me, how can you think of carrying on business? If you do *not*, what must I think of a man who deals worse with me, than he does with any body else?—–If you think you may trespass more upon *me*, than you can on *others*, that is a very bad compliment to my *prudence*, or your own *gratitude*. For surely good usage should be intitled to good usage. I know how to allow for disappointments as well as any man; but can a man be disappointed for ever? Trade is so dependent a thing, you know, that it cannot be carried on without mutual punctuality. Does not the merchant expect it from me, for those very goods I send you? And can I make a return to him, without receiving it from you? What end can it answer to give you two years credit, and then be at an uncertainty for goods which I sell at a small profit, and have not six months credit for myself? Indeed, sir, this will never do. I must be more punctually used by you, or else must deal as little punctually with others; and what then must be the consequence?—–In short, sir, I expect a handsome payment by the next return, and security for the remainder; and shall be very loth to take any harsh methods to procure this justice to myself, my family, and my own creditors. For I am, if it be not your own fault,

Your faithful Friend and Servant[43]

Although this letter is in the chiding, or vituperative, tradition, it also illustrates several features still advised by current texts on business writing: appealing to the reader's sense of fair play, specifying a deadline, and threatening legal action if payment is not forthcoming.

This letter enjoyed enormous popularity, being reprinted, according to Hornbeak,[44] in at least 73 later letter-writers, though never with attribution. The last book in which I have found the letter is the 1854 American edition of *The New Universal Letter-Writer*. It would seem that the later plagiarists were copying not Richardson's letter, but a copy of it, for every other British version I have seen not only changes the reader's name and the first sentence—perhaps to disguise the fact of plagiarism—but also converts Richardson's truism, "Trade is so dependent a thing . . ." to the nonsensical "Trade is so independent a thing. . . ."[46] The immediate source for the borrowings seems to be not Richardson, but Thomas Cooke, whose *Universal Letter-Writer* (1771) makes these changes and creates a departure from Richardson's first dunning letter which is used in preference to Richardson's in all the subsequent letter-writers.

Judging from the changes he made, Cooke was uncomfortable with the briskness, directness, and moral superiority of Richardson's creditor. Cooke substitutes the heading "An urgent Demand of Payment" for Richardson's "pressing and angry Letter."[47] The first sentence he prefers echoes the modest and apologetic dunning letters, offering, like them, the creditor's own affairs as justification for the request: "The exigence of my affairs compels me thus importunately, nay peremptorily to write to you." Richardson's first sentence uses simple words, none longer than two syllables, while Cooke's uses three long, Latinate words whose polysyllables mute the spleen evident in Richardson's letter. In the 1819 edition of *The Universal Letter-Writer*, Cooke

further moderates Richardson's letter by omitting over a third of it.[48] The response that Richardson provides acknowledges the justice of the creditor's attack: "Sir, I must acknowledge I have not used you well. . . . your letter is no bad lesson to me; I have conn'd it often, and hope I shall improve by it."[49] Cooke's debtor, in contrast, acknowledges not blame but merely "the lenity you have at all times shown," and asserts that he has not paid his creditor only because *his* debtors have not paid him. He takes from his creditor's letter a lesson not in morals but in business: "I am determined, for the future, to make the rules laid down in your excellent letter a guide, in my dealing with those people, whose dilatoriness in making good their payments to me, obliged me to disappoint you."[50] Cooke revises both the letter and the response in *The New and Complete Universal Letter-Writer* (1790), making explicit what had to be inferred from the 1771 response: "I must take the liberty of assuring you again most solemnly, that my remissness has been wholly owing to the remissness of others in the payment of sums due to me."[51] Perhaps Cooke felt that the harshness of Richardson's letter could only be justified if information about the amount and the term of the loan were supplied, for his harsh letter in *The New and Complete Universal Letter-Writer* makes both of these facts clear in the first sentence:

> Sir,
> You must recollect, that when you applied to me, requesting the loan of 40£, with positive declaration of repaying me in three months, I complied with your desire, and at the same time represented to you the very injurious consequences with which your failure would be attended to me. Six months are now elapsed, and have passed unnoticed by you. What can I infer from such treatment, but that I was deceived in my opinion of your principle? I thought you a man of probity, and as such strained a point to serve you, for the sole motive, as I observed, of a friendly regard. I can hardly refrain still from thinking you one of those I admitted into the number of my friends from a persuasion of your title to social regard; convince me that you are so, and obviate the disagreeable necessity of reproaching you with ingratitude, and myself with folly.[52]

The last new example of a vituperative letter appears in *The Modern Letter Writer* (1812). It offers a glorious finale to the tradition, for the imagination and detail with which its writer berates the debtor far exceed those of the models offered by Richardson and Day:

> Sir,
> Inclosed is your account, and I am sorry the statement of your mode of living, which has been reported to me, is such, that I must, in justice to myself, demand an immediate payment of the balance. It is not my disposition to act unkindly, or distress any man, but when I see people, with my property in their hands, squandering away their substance in wanton extravagance, it becomes necessary for me to see a little to my affairs. Sir, I am informed you keep a horse and chaise, and country lodgings; that you belong to clubs, and are a Buck, an Odd Fellow, a Free and Easy, and the Lord knows what; in a word, that business is a secondary

concern with you; nay, what is worse, I have heard it hinted you game [gamble]. I began the world, Sir, with a greater capital than you, and with as good a connexion, in cheaper times, but I never kept a horse till I was not able to walk, and other men no richer than myself, kept their coach; [sic]; as to the sin and folly of wasting my time in debaching and gaming, I always was above it, for whatever you may think, a man is much more creditably employed in his business, than in sotting amongst mimics and stage players, or wasting money not his own amongst sharpers.

Sir, your having married my kinswoman will not protect you against my taking the necessary steps to recover my money: were you my own son I would not act otherwise, and am very sorry to have reason to cease subscribing myself

Your sincere friend[53]

In Richardson's response, the debtor acknowledges the justice of the creditor's attacks on his business sense and, implicitly, his morals. Here, however, the debtor proceeds to "answer the charges you bring against me, one by one." His reasons reveal him to be a model of pre-Victorian propriety. He borrowed a chaise and hired a horse on only one occasion to give chase to a man "who owed me a great deal of money [and] was absconding near the seacoast," presumably planning to sail for the continent where he would be out of his creditor's reach. "The state of my poor wife's health is such as to require country air. . . . As to clubs, I belong to none, except the lodge of Free-Masons, to which you yourself introduced me, and you, who know all the members, can judge whether they are proper company or not; and with respect to gaming, I can declare I never played at any game of chance in my life, except whist, and that not for more than a shilling a point."[54]

The nineteenth-century letter-writers are on the whole a fairly staid lot, and the eccentricity of this 1812 dunning letter and response is matched only once—in *Punch's Complete Letter Writer* (1845).[55] But *Punch's* collection is clearly designed for amusement, while *The Modern Letter Writer's* purpose is utilitarian.

Brisk and Businesslike Letters: 1741-1873

Of the dunning letters in the old letter-writers, brisk and businesslike letters are the least entertaining from a literary point of view but the most interesting from a historical point of view, for they seem the surest guide to actual practice. Letters in this category are brief, factual and to-the-point. They frequently specify the amount due, the term of the original loan, and a date by which payment is expected. They may range from mild "hints" to harsh letters threatening imprisonment, but in either case, they confine themselves to the specific circumstances of the debt, never using it, as the vituperative letters do, as a springboard for discussing the debtor's other real or imagined faults. Because few of the letters are intrinsically interesting, I shall discuss only a sampling of the letters in this category.

Since Samuel Richardson had so great an influence on the other kinds of dunning letters, it is appropriate that at least one of his examples falls into this third category. Richardson labels the following "A threatening Letter from a Steward on Delay of Payment":

> *Mr.* Atkins,
>
> I have mentioned your case to Sir John, as you requested. He is exceeding provoked at your usage, and swears bloodily he'll seize, and throw you into gaol, if he has not 20 *l.* at least paid him by quarter-day, which is now at hand. So you know what you have to trust to; and I would have you avoid the consequences at any rate; for he is resolved otherwise to do as he says. Of this I assure you, who am
>
> *Yours*, &c[56]

The situation is evidently not quite so dire as the threat of imprisonment would seem to indicate; the tenant responds to this letter with a "moving answer," after which the steward does indeed grant more time.

It is probable that Richardson invented the business letters in *Familiar Letters* just as we know that he invented those on courtship and marriage. William Anderson's *Practical Mercantile Correspondence* (1836) offers the first sure guide to actual practice, for his examples are "genuine commercial letters."[57] His dunning letter indicates that creditors are becoming much prompter in requesting payment: the bill for which the writer requests payment was due "yesterday," and a lapse of two more days brings forth a vague but menacing threat.

> 10*th January* 1835
>
> Joseph Manning, Esq., *Piccadilly*
>
> Sir,—Your acceptance for 38 *l.* drawn by me on the 6th [sic] October last, and payable to my order three months after date, fell due yesterday, and now lies at my bankers, Messrs. Curtis & Co, Lombard Street, noted for non-payment. I beg, therefore, to call your immediate attention to it, and request you will take up the same with 5s. Expenses thereon.—I remain, Sir, your obedient humble servant,
>
> T. Williams
>
> 12*th Jan.* 1835
>
> Joseph Manning, Esq., *Piccadilly*
>
> Sir,—I am very much surprised at your inattention, in a matter of so much importance as a dishonoured draft. Referring you to my note of the day before yesterday, informing you that your acceptance of 38 *l.* had been noted for non-payment, I beg now to say, that if the draft be not immediately taken up, I shall be compelled to have recourse to measures, no less unpleasant to me than disagreeable to yourself.—I am, Sir, yours, &c.,
>
> T. Williams[58]

Anderson's debtor seems to feel no surprise at the creditor's position, and has already paid the bill when the second letter arrives:

> 12*th Jan.* 1835
>
> Thomas Williams, Esq.
>
> Sir,—Having been out of town for the last fortnight, I am truly concerned to find that no provision was made for my acceptance of your draft due on the 9th inst. for

38 *I*. When on my return to town this morning, your note of the 10th was put into my hands, I immediately took up the bill, which now lies before me, together with your note of this morning. I can only regret having, through inadvertancy, caused you so much trouble. Believe me, very sincerely, Sir, your obedient humble servant,

Joseph Manning[59]

Anderson's book was extremely popular. It was translated into "most of the European languages;"[60] a 30th edition in English appeared in 1890. The same dunning (and indeed other) letters continue to appear in these later editions, with only trivial changes (e.g., by the 1858 edition, the word "humble" has been deleted from the complimentary close).

The Gentlemen's Hand-Book of Letter-Writing (1854?) is the first letter-writer to offer blanks for the reader to fill in. In the following series of letters, the first bears some affinity to the modest letters we have seen, citing the reader's own "exigencies" and indicating that prompt payment will be "a real convenience" to the writer. However, the real reason for the request is not the reader's need but the earlier billing, the date of which the user of the model is to supply.

Sir,

The exigencies of my business are at present so urgent, that I feel compelled to direct your attention to my account which I sent in as far back as (of) last. The amount, as you will find, is not large; but such as it is, the settlement of it by an early opportunity will be a real convenience to,

Sir,

Your most obedient servant,

Sir,

It is painful to be obliged once more to advert to the settlement of your account. I have now become quite weary in awaiting the fulfilment [sic] of your promises. Time after time have you given me your assurance that the bill should be settled by a certain day, but the expectation which I have formed in each instance that you would keep your word, and not oblige me to take unpleasant steps, have [sic] been disappointed. I must therefore tell you, candidly, that unless you come to a settlement of the account by the ( ) instant, I shall then resort to legal measures.

I am, sir,

Your obedient servant,[61]

The last new examples I have seen in this category are the "*bona fide*" letters which appear in P. L. Simmonds' *The Commercial Letter-Writer: A Series of Modern and Practical Letters of Business, Trade Circulars, Forms etc., Selected from actual Mercantile Correspondence* (1873). The seven examples Simmonds provides offer several interesting points: the first dunning letter I have seen with a postscript (example 1); an allusion to "the Society for the Protection of Traders" (example 4), which evidently serves as a collection agency; and evidence that creditors are now giving discounts to customers who pay their bills promptly (example 6).

(1)

29th May, 1866

Sir,—Our Collector will have the pleasure of calling upon you on Friday morning next for settlement of our account.

Thanking you for your kind favours, which shall at all times command our prompt attention,

We remain,

Yours respectfully,

Malcolmson & Co.

Amount of Account, £5 7*s*. 6*d*.

P.S.—If absent from home, please leave instructions to pay our Collector, as it is a long way to call for so small an amount.

(2)

Gentlemen,—I was greatly surprised on presenting your bill for £57, at Messrs. Glyn & Co.'s, yesterday, that it was returned. As, however, I do not wish to be the means of putting you to further expense than noting, &c, let me know *immediately* if you can arrange the matter before 2.30 this day.

I am, Sir,

Yours obediently,

Martin Sedley

(3)

Liverpool, May, 1866

Sir,—We shall feel greatly obliged if you will remit us a cheque for the goods supplied you in December last. Our accounts are balanced every twelve months, and your default prevents us from closing our books for the date alluded to.

We are, Sir,

Yours obediently,

R. Nichol & Co.

(4)

Sir,—I beg to draw your attention to the enclosed account, which is long overdue, and beg to state that if it is not settled forthwith, I shall be compelled to place it for collection in the hands of the Society for the Protection of Traders.

J. Arrowsmith

(5)

June 14, 1865

Mr. Raikes, Liverpool

Sir,—As I have received no reply to my two letters requesting remittance for amount [sic] of your bill returned unpaid, I beg to say that unless I receive the amount by Saturday morning next, I shall place the matter in my solicitor's hands.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

R. Mouat

(6)

Mr. Robinson, Pembroke.

Dear Sir,—On looking over my books, I observe that you have been in the habit for some time past of settling your account at twelve months instead of six months, as is done by my other customers. I have no objection to continuing to grant you that credit if you require it, but in that case, I think it right to inform you that you

will not be entitled to discount on future payments, as I can only allow it on current six months' accounts. Should you wish to save your discount, you will please remit me the balance of the account last delivered to you.

I remain, dear Sir,
Yours truly,
R. Davenport.

(7)

London, 27th July, 1866

Mr. Connolly, Northhampton.

Sir,—I am really much surprised at the way you treat me. After renewing your bill to oblige you, you then fail to meet it, and only send me £20 on account; thus giving me the trouble of writing half a dozen letters for the paltry balance of £8 13s. If the amount were large, I might assume that you could not send it; but as it is so small, I can only think that you will not do it, and I must say it is a very uncourteous return for the accommodation I have always been ready to give you. I trust this is the last time I shall have to write for it.

Yours obediently,
Philip Jones[62]

Model Dunning Letters and Actual Practice

Although the letter-writers were unabashedly practical, "Calculated," as the title page of Cooke's 1790 revision promised, "to enable the Reader to Write Letters on every Subject without any further instruction," it is difficult to say to what extent they actually influenced contemporary practice. Most of the letters clearly were either invented by the author of the book or appropriated from earlier books on letter writing; not until 1836 do we find dunning letters in a collection of "genuine commercial letters." The best letter-writers succeed because the letters are inherently interesting even if one is not searching for a model. Of the 33 books I surveyed, at least one—*Punch's Complete Letter Writer* (1845)—is a satire on letter-writing conventions rather than a serious model, and another two seem at least as interested in creating plots and characters in the letters and responses as in offering models for correspondence.

It is possible that even the letters which sound strangest to us—the apologetic and the vituperative letters—either were taken from real letters or were imitated by some of the many people who bought letter-writers. The apologetic letters may reflect the disdain with which the upper classes in Britain regarded "trade" until well into this century: in some circles, discussions of money were considered as indelicate as discussions of sex. And the 1792 Committee found evidence of real creditors who were quite as vindictive as the authors of the comminatory letters in the letter-writers:

Been in Prison more than Eight Years. Debt £221. I was a Silk Weaver, and lost £100 by a Man taking Goods of me, and absconding. A Mrs. Cline is my Plaintiff; she has

been often applied to, to get me out, but she refused, saying, she would keep me here all my Life, even if she was forced to support me. . . . I offered, if she would give me my Discharge, to work out the Debt at £10 a year, but she would not come to any Agreement of the Sort; I paid her 10 Guineas [£10.s10] the Morning she arrested me in her own House, where she arrested me not Five Minutes after the Payment. . . .[63]

It seems clear that by the nineteenth century, at least, the model letters do in fact reflect contemporary practice. Not only do we have real business letters and "fill-in-the-blank" form letters, but even the invented examples are revised to reflect current business practice. In 1771, a debtor in one of Cooke's letter who is unprepared to meet a creditor's demand claims, "I know the stated credit in this article, used to be only four months; [but] it has always been the custom to allow at least two months more."[64] An 1839 American plagiarism of Cooke modifies this phrase to read, "it has been a custom to allow a moderate time beyond this, and as this is only the day of the old time, I had not yet prepared myself."[65] Although one dunning letter in *The Commercial Letter Writer* (1841) is apologetic ("I trust you will excuse the freedom I am taking") in requesting payment of an account a year overdue,[66] another letter denies a request for a month's extension on a bill "which [you] agreed to pay in two months."[67]

Manchester, May 22nd, 1840

Sir,

I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 20th, and, in reference to your application, to remind you, that you are travelling quite out of the general routine of commercial business. We are not in the habit of granting an extension of the usual time of payment for purchases made at our manufactory; for, were it once known in the trade that we did so, the claims upon our indulgence would soon be more numerous than we could conveniently withstand; and again, to show an undue preference to any of our customers, would not only be acting unfairly towards the others, but would eventually tend to establish a system unjust in itself, and detrimental to the best interests of the firm.

I shall be in London in the course of a few days, and will take an early opportunity to confer with you farther on this subject.

I remain, Sir, your obedient servant,[68]

If the examples in nineteenth-century letter-writers indeed reflect contemporary practice, then both apologetic and vituperative dunning letters were dying out, being replaced by brisk and businesslike letters. This change may be seen as progress, as a movement toward a more careful accounting of the capital which funded the Industrial Revolution and brought a comfortable standard of living to a growing middle class. It may also be seen as loss, as a further manifestation that what Carlyle termed a "cash nexus" was replacing the bonds of loyalty to and responsibility for one's fellow men which, Carlyle believed, sustained pre-industrial society. Most of the nineteenth-century letter-writers, if they note the change at all, see it as

progress: "The epistles in 'Cooke's Letter Writer'" wrote one author, "smack rather of Sir Charles Grandison's days than of our own."[69] Another author expressed a minority view, arguing that the trend toward brusque dunning letters had gone too far. "A friendly correspondence once established," he admonished his readers, "must not relapse into mere formalities, unless a decided quarrel and separation have taken place." He offered the following anecdote to drive home his point:

> A gentleman had been for many years on terms of intimate friendship with his tailor . . . [but was now] a little in arrears. . . . [The tailor] sent a short and brusque letter, as follows:—
>
> "Sir,
>
> "I am disappointed in not having received the amount of my bill as promised by you in your last: may I beg the favour of a speedy settlement? Yours obediently,
>
> Simon Slowstitch"
>
> To this an answer was returned as follows:—
>
> "My dear Slowstitch,
>
> "Last time you wrote I owed you nothing, and you addressed me as your 'Dear Nonplus'; but since I have unfortunately failed to meet your demand, according to my own promise, you reduce me to a mere 'Sir', upon your list of patrons. Do you intend to terminate a friendship of ten years in this way, or do you propose resuming the 'Dear Nonplus' with a view to be mine 'faithfully' when the account is settled (as it will be to-morrow) remaining in the meanwhile mine "obediently" only? Will you allow me to suggest that expressions of friendship are open to question both as to their value and their sincerity when they are made to depend on business relations for the respective amounts of warmth or coldness which shall be infused into them. [sic] To be consistent, I shall have to adopt a cringing tone when I owe you money, and a tone of pompous patronage the moment I have paid it; that is, if any correspondence should continue between yourself and yours, very truly,
>
> Stephen Nonplus"[70]

Notes and References

1. Katharine Gee Hornbeak, "The Complete Letter-Writer in English," *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, 15 (1934), nos. 3-4, Appendix II.

2. Harry B. Weiss, *American Letter-Writers, 1698-1943* (New York: New York Public Library, 1945), pp. 26-54.

3. Hornbeak, p. 39.

4. See the introduction by Patrick McGrath, ed., *The Marchants Aviso*, Pub. No. II of the Kress Library of Business and Economics (Cambridge, MA: Baker Library, Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, 1957), xiv-xv.

5. J. Willis Westlake, *How To Write Letters: A Manual of Correspondence* (Philadelphia: Christopher Sower Co., 1876), p. 108n.

6. I am indebted to Robert Ginsberg, Professor of Law, DePaul University, and Visiting Professor of Law, University of Illinois, for his criticisms of and comments about this section.

7. Report from the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Practice and Effects of Imprisonment for Debt, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Sheila Lambert (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1975), Vol. 80: George III Reports and Papers 1790-91 and 1792, pp. 268, 306-12, 314, 322, 326.

8. Report, p. 332.

9. Report, p. 321.

10. Shirley Joan Brown, "The Preparation of the English Mind for the Abolition of Imprisonment for Debt 1653-1869," B.A. Thesis, University of Illinois, 1958, p. 23.

11. Report, Appendices, *passim.*; p. 313.

12. Brown, p. 23.

13. Walter Besant, *London in the Eighteenth Century* (London: A. & C. Black, 1902, rpt. 1925), pp. 609-10.

14. For the amazing case of a rich man who made money in prison while refusing to pay his debts, see Report, p. 349.

15. Llewellyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 472. The Act of 1813 permitted insolvent imprisoned debtors to be released after giving up all their goods. See Thomas Erskine May, *The Constitutional History of England*, ed. Francis Holland (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), Vol. II, p. 146.

16. Charles Ellis, *A Treatise on the Law of Debtor and Creditor* (London: Joseph Butterworth & Son, 1822), p. 414.

17. Ellis, pp. 433-36.

18. Besant, p. 570.

19. Report, pp. 269-70.

20. Alan Harding, *A Social History of English Law* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 53. Such an agreement, called a cognovit, confession of judgment, or warrant of attorney, is common in consumer contracts and leases; its use was not limited in Illinois until 1979.

21. "Imprisonment for Debt," *Michigan Law Review*, 25 (1926-27), 28.

22. Woodward, p. 472.

23. Bruce H. Mann, "Rationality, Legal Change, and Community in Connecticut, 1690-1760," *Law and Society Review*, 14:2 (1980), 193.

24. Peter R. Nehemkis, Jr., "The Boston Poor Debtor Court—A Study in Collection Procedure," *Yale Law Journal*, 42 (1932-33), 576.

25. "Imprisonment for Debt and the Constitution," *Law and the Social Order*, 1970 (1970), 660.

26. J. W. Ehrlich, *Ehrlich's Blackstone* (rpt. of William Blackstone's *Commentaries* [London: 1765-69]; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. 541.

27. "Imprisonment for Debt," *The Journal of Law*, 1 (1830), 270.

28. Quoted in Abraham L. Freedman, "Imprisonment for Debt," *Temple Law Quarterly*, 2 (1927-28), 352.

29. Nicholas Breton, *A Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters* (London: John Marriot, 1637), Letter #43, p. 17, in *The Works in Verse and Prose of Nicholas Breton*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart. ([Edinburgh:] Edinburgh University Press, 1879), Vol. II. Spelling modernized.

30. W. P., *A Flying Post, with a Packet of Choice new Letters and Compliments* (London: Printed for John Williamson, 1678), p. 42.

31. Samuel Richardson, *Familiar Letters on Important Occasions*, 1741, rpt., Introduction by Brian W. Downs (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1928), Letter XLII, p. 48.

32. Richardson, Letter XLIII, p. 48.

33. Thomas Cooke, *The Universal Letter-Writer, or New Art of Polite Correspondence, Containing a Course of Interesting Original Letters* (London: Printed for J. Cooke [1771]), p. 45.

34. *A New Letter Writer, for the Use of Gentlemen, Embodying Letters on the Simplest Matters of Life. . . .* (London: George Routledge and Sons, n.d.), pp. 28-29. *A New Letter Writer* was probably published between 1867 and 1873: several of its examples are dated "1866," and it is bound with P. L. Simmonds' *The Commercial Letter Writer: A Series of Modern and Practical Letters of Business, Trade Circulars, Forms etc., Selected from actual Mercantile Correspondence* (London: George Routledge and Sons), which, according to the British Library catalogue, was published in 1873. Weiss lists an American edition of *A New Letter Writer* which also has no date; Weiss believes that the edition appeared in 1868 (Weiss, p. 40).

35. *The Complete Letter-Writer, Containing Familiar Letters on the Most Common Occasions in Life. Also a Variety of Elegant Letters for the Direction and Embellishment of Style, on Business, Duty, Amusement, Love, Courtship, Marriage, Friendship, and other Subjects* (London: Printed for J. Brambles, A. Meggitt, and J. Waters by H. Mozley, 1804), p. 88.

36. *The Modern Letter-Writer, or, Whole Art of Polite Correspondence* (Gainesborough: Henry Mozley, 1812), p. 64.

37. *The Modern Letter-Writer*, p. 64.

38. *The Modern Letter-Writer*, p. 65.

39. *The Young Clerk's Manual, or Counting House Assistant, Embracing Instructions relating to Mercantile Correspondence, Bookkeeping, Bills, etc.* New ed. (London: Cradock & Co., 1848), pp. 5-6.

40. R[ichard] C. Austin, *The Commercial Letter Writer, or a Series of Mercantile Precedents, designed as an Accompaniment to The Copy Book . . . for the Use of Schools & Private Tuition* (London: William Harris, 1841), p. 9.

41. Angel Day, *The English Secretary* (2nd. ed. 1592; facsimile reprint of the 1599 ed. with an introduction by Robert O. Evans (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967), Book II, p. 51. Spelling modernized.

42. Day, II, 52. Spelling modernized.

43. Richardson, p. 49.

44. Hornbeak, p. 121.

45. *The New Universal Letter-Writer, or Complete Art of Polite Correspondence: Containing a Course of Interesting Letters on the Most Important, Instructive, and Entertaining Subjects . . .* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854), p. 43. No author is given, but this edition, identical to an 1839 edition by another publisher, is clearly based on Cooke's *Universal Letter-Writer*.

46. The 1839 and 1854 American editions of *The New Universal Letter-Writer* adopt Cooke's revision of the reader's name and first sentence but restore Richardson's truism to accuracy. Since the anonymous editor claims that the examples in *The New Universal Letter-Writer* have been "carefully adapted to the circumstances of our own country" (p. 10), it seems probable that the correction is due simply to careful editing and that the immediate source is still Cooke rather than Richardson.

47. Cooke, p. 47.

48. (London: T. Hughes, 1819). Although the title page mistakenly identifies the author as "F. Cooke," the preface calls the book a new edition of *The Universal Letter-Writer*.

49. Richardson, p. 50.

50. Cooke, p. 48.

51. Thomas Cooke, *The New and Complete Universal Letter-Writer, or Young Secretary's Instructor* (London: Printed for C. Cooke [1790]), p. 40.

52. *New and Complete Universal Letter-Writer*, pp. 52-53. This letter may have been influenced by Richardson's letter CXXII, pp. 144-45.

53. *The Modern Letter-Writer*, pp. 66-67.

54. *The Modern Letter-Writer*, pp. 67-68.

55. Douglas Jerrold, *Punch's Complete Letter-Writer* (London: Punch Office, 1845), pp. 37-42.

56. Richardson, p. 133.

57. William Anderson, *Practical Mercantile Correspondence, A Collection of Modern Letters of Business* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1836), p. v.

58. Anderson, pp. 60-61.

59. Anderson, pp. 61-62.

60. W. *Anderson's Commercial Correspondence: A Collection of Modern Letters of Business*, new ed. (Paris: J. H. Truchy, 1858), p. 14.

61. *The Gentlemen's Handbook of Letter-Writing Containing Original Letters Relative to Business, Duty, Friendship, Love, and Marriage* (Philadelphia: Henry F. Anners [1854]), pp. 26-27.

62. P. L. Simmonds, *The Commercial Letter-Writer: A Series of Modern and Practical Letters of Business, Trade Circulars, Forms etc., Selected from actual Mercantile Correspondence*. (London: George Routledge & Sons [1873]), pp. 81-85, 88-89. The British Library Catalog is the source for the date of Simmonds' book.

63. Report, pp. 324-25.

64. Cooke, 1771, p. 49.

65. *The New Universal Letter-Writer, or, Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (Philadelphia: Hogan & Thompson, 1839), p. 44.

66. Austin, p. 9.

67. Austin, pp. 20-21.

68. Austin, p. 21.

69. *The Imperial Letter-Writer, Embodying Letters on the Simplest Matters of Life, for the Use of Ladies and Gentlemen* (London: George Routledge & Sons, n.d.), p. iii. The copy in the British Library is bound with Simmonds.

70. *Letter-Writing Simplified, for those who are not used to it. A Guide to Friendly, Affectionate, Commercial, and Complimentary Correspondence* (London: Groomsbridge and Sons, 1856), pp. 24-25.

The Teaching of Business Writing at the Collegiate Level, 1900-1920

Francis W. Weeks
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

George Burton Hotchkiss (1884-1953) was the college professor most responsible for establishing the modern teaching of business writing in American colleges and universities. Further research may establish that he should share that honor with others, but investigation points to Hotchkiss as the author and teacher to whom the field of business communication owes the most.

Origins of this Study

This study began as an attempt to write the history of the Division of Business and Technical Writing at the University of Illinois, first to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the first collegiate course in Business Writing at Illinois, then to commemorate the 80th anniversary. Both of these anniversaries have passed and the difficulty of finding primary sources is partly to blame. One would think that university archives would contain all kinds of material relating to courses and teachers of bygone days. Such is not the case, at least at Illinois. Furthermore, the study should have been done forty years ago when the pioneers discussed here were still alive. Now they are gone and their earliest students also.

That leaves only their books as evidence of their influence. Early textbook authors seldom acknowledged their sources—not in prefaces, rarely in bibliographies, and never in footnotes. Thus guesswork replaces assured findings in many places in this work.

Early on it became apparent that the history of the teaching of business writing at Illinois could not be written in isolation from what was going on at other universities (New York University and Wisconsin) or from the development of education for business nationally. Thus the scope of the study was expanded.

Help was provided by Professor J. Harold Janis who was associated with Hotchkiss and Kilduff at New York University and by the late H. L. Creek of

Purdue University who started his teaching career at Illinois. Both wrote letters giving historical information.

The Influence of Hotchkiss

That George Hotchkiss holds first place is not to say that he taught the first course in business writing. The first course was taught at the University of Illinois in 1902 by Thomas Arkle Clark. Nor did Hotchkiss write the first college-level textbook. Edward Hall Gardner of the University of Wisconsin has the honor.

It was Hotchkiss, however, who first emphasized the principle of the "you" attitude and talked about the "five C's" of business writing. And it is not hard to trace a line of descent from his 1916 book down to the latest editions of some of our current popular textbooks.

Hotchkiss graduated from Yale University and his first position was as instructor in Rhetoric at Beloit College from 1906-1908.[1] From 1908-1911 he was instructor in English at New York University. Moving into Business English at the New York University School of Commerce, Accounts, and Finance, he became Professor and then, moving into Marketing, became Head of the Department of Marketing. He acquired a considerable reputation in the areas of salesmanship and marketing, and in 1924 wrote a book on advertising copy which still merits reading.

His first work in Business Writing came early—1909 according to Janis—a series of 12 little books called *Business English* designed as a home study correspondence course. From this developed his college-level textbook *Business English, Principles and Practice*, with co-author Celia Ann Drew, published in 1916. His textbook was revised with E. J. Kilduff as co-author and became *Advanced Business Correspondence*. The last edition has J. Harold Janis as co-author. Kilduff (1889-1969) was the first president of the American Business Communication Association.

The Earliest Book by a College Professor

Of some antiquarian interest is a book by Professor J. Willis Westlake, published in 1876 in Philadelphia. Westlake was Professor of English Literature in the State Normal School, Millersville, Pennsylvania. It would be interesting to know what Professor Westlake taught and if anyone else ever used his book.

He begins: "Nearly all of the writing of most persons is in the form of letters; and yet in many of our schools this kind of composition is almost entirely neglected. This neglect is probably due in some measure to the fact that heretofore there has been no complete, systematic treatise on the subject of letter writing."[2]

It is possible that the book was not used as a college text at all. He says: "It is designed, both in matter and method, to meet the wants, not only of schools of various grades, but also of private learners and of society at large."[3] Obviously, like contemporary authors, Professor Westlake wanted the largest audience possible. He says that for many years he had felt the need for such a work in the instruction of his own classes. He suggested that students would do better to write letters than to write themes and other compositions. Since the book was written only a few years after the typewriter became commercially available, it is interesting to read a special notice inserted after the Introduction: "Owing to the rapidly increasing use of the *typewriting-machine* in correspondence, the author has thought proper to insert in the present edition of this work some special directions applicable to typewritten letters, which may be found on pages 66 and 67."[4] Many books published in the early part of our own century, show examples of handwritten letters only.

What Books Could Early Business Writing Teachers Have Used?

Noticing that the first courses in business writing, Illinois in 1902 and New York University in 1906, antedate the publication of the first college-level textbooks by thirteen and nine years, one wonders what the early teachers used in place of textbooks. There were books, of course, which were not specifically designed for college-level teaching, but, like Westlake's, were advertised as being suitable for all educational levels.

Commercial Correspondence and Postal Information, by Carl Lewis Altmaier, is one of these books. It was designed primarily for use in the new commercial high schools which were being established at that time in such cities as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Newark. Macmillan and Company published a series of books suitable for use in those schools. The use of a high school book in a college-level course would not have been as strange in those years as it would be now. For one thing, the level of instruction in the high schools was pretty high by our current standards. Not every young person went to high school, and those who went were the better students.

The commercial high school was the response of society to a demand on the part of business for employees who had some specific training for business and not just the "common school education" which many presented as their best qualification for an entry-level job. Moreover, teachers moved from high schools to universities more freely than they do now. Alta Gwinn Saunders of Illinois and Roy Davis of Boston University were high school teachers at the start of their careers. C. R. Anderson, one of the founders and the first Executive Director of the American Business Communication Association, began his teaching career at Champaign, Illinois, High School.

There were also books designed for home study by correspondence, published by the A. W. Shaw Company of Chicago and the Alexander Hamilton Institute of New York. In 1911, the LaSalle Extension University in Chicago published *Business English*, by E. H. Lewis, "for students from high school to college." The Business Training Corporation of New York City published in 1916 a 12-volume (small volumes, about 100 pages each) course in Business English, "prepared under the direction of George Burton Hotchkiss." Listed as cooperating and assisting are E. J. Kilduff and Bruce Barton, later a very prominent man in the field of advertising. There were also the books written and published by Sherwin Cody from 1906-1908.[5]

Although not designed specifically for college training, the books of correspondence schools and business institutes might have been useful. But still one wonders how the teachers between 1900 and 1915 managed.

Who Were These Teachers?

Who were these teachers? Where did they come from? How were they chosen (or did they volunteer?) to teach business writing? To begin with, they were graduates of liberal arts colleges, probably English majors. Collegiate schools of business hardly existed at this early period. Indeed, it was the founding of such schools that created the demand for courses in business writing.

New York University established its School of Commerce, Accounts, and Finance in 1900. The Business Writing course was established in 1906 and was taught by the dean of the college until Hotchkiss arrived in 1908.[6]

Often the teachers probably had had some experience in business in addition to their academic training. In the October 1952 issue of *The ABWA Bulletin*, there is an interesting article by H. L. Creek, "How I Became an Expert in Business English."[7] Creek explains that he had dropped out of college to go to work in business to make his fortune. He had been told that if he learned shorthand and typing he would be on the road to executive success:

> After a time I found that I was not making progress toward a hundred thousand a year salary, and so I decided to become a school teacher. I returned to college, of which I had previously had a little experience, and even got a Ph.D. Then I settled down to teaching ordinary composition and literature classes at the University of Illinois [1910-1920]. Unfortunately, somebody remembered that I had once been a stenographer, and suggested I was admirably fitted to teach classes in business letter writing. Not wishing to fail again, I took the classes. Since I knew nothing about business letters except a few things not to do, I had to learn a little more. I did this by reading the textbook—by a college professor, of course—[Gardner, *Effective Business Letters* 1915]. And so I became an expert in business writing.
>
> . . .

> I might explain that at this time there were two kinds of teachers of business writing. One consisted of the very few who really knew something about the subject. They might be able to earn a fee of fifty dollars or even one hundred dollars by composing a good sales letter which had been given preliminary tests to prove its "pulling power." I remember one man of this sort at the University of Illinois. [Harrison McJohnston] But soon a business concern lured him away with a salary of $100 a week—a fabulous sum in those days and probably more than the head of the department of English was getting. Consequently, he and all the genuine experts were soon lost to the business writing courses. This left "experts" like myself who might have had some superficial connection with business or might merely be regarded as "practical." The students liked the business writing courses even as we taught them; and the heads of the English departments were glad to find anybody to do the work. I need not say that we were sometimes looked upon with a certain condescension by the "real scholars" in the Department.

Creek went on to be Professor and Head of the Department of English at Purdue University.

The Influence of Harrison McJohnston

While Creek was at Illinois, Harrison McJohnston, the true originator of Illinois business writing courses, was hired by the English department [1913]. The department head either wanted to have the course organized and taught in the best fashion possible or he was just lucky. McJohnston had had teaching experience at Ohio State (Lecturer in Economics) as well as business experience—copywriter, sales correspondent, and editor (*System* and *Printers' Ink*).[8] Thus he was well qualified for the position of instructor in salesmanship and Business English.

In 1957, when asked about McJohnston, Creek wrote:

> I remember McJohnston fairly well although we were never very intimate. It doesn't seem now that there was organization of the staff of teachers then. But he was the first teacher, so far as I know, who had a professional attitude. He had had business experience—just what I don't know—and continued to have business connections during his Illinois years. . . . He was a shrewd, practical man, slender, sharp-faced, with a good deal of drive. He was not of the academic type and never had much support from the administration of the English Department. I feel reasonably certain, for example, that Professor Sherman [Stuart Pratt Sherman, noted author and literary critic and Head of the English Department at the University of Illinois] did not particularly like him and would have preferred a literary scholar who knew enough about business to teach the course.[9]

In 1913, McJohnston set up three courses: 1) Business Writing—general business correspondence, exclusive of the sales letter; 2) Sales Correspondence—the economic and psychological principles underlying successful sales letter writing; planning the letter sales campaign; the form of the followup letters; analysis of markets, etc. 3) Summarizing and Abstracting—summarizing, briefing, and making reports; abstracts of correspondence on file; summarizing of commercial and economic data.[10]

All three were two-hour courses. McJohnston also added a "Senior Conference on Written Work." "Each senior will present to the instructor all the written papers presented during the year in his different courses for review and criticism by the instructor, they are open to serious criticism. Required of all seniors in the courses in Business Administration."[11] Later a second semester of Senior Conferences was added but was not required. The Senior Conference courses did not last long, and one may guess that McJohnston had all he could do teaching three different courses without the added load of the Senior Conferences.

After leaving Illinois, McJohnston worked for the Brevity Publishing Company in Chicago and had an appointment in 1920 as Lecturer on General Business Correspondence at Northwestern University. What he did in subsequent years is not known.

The Developing Program in Illinois

Using the University of Illinois as an example, primarily because of available information, it is interesting to inquire as to who taught the course between 1902 and 1913 when McJohnston arrived? To begin, here is a historical footnote. The course in business writing was part of a program of "course in preparation for business" established by an act of the Illinois Legislature in 1900. In that year, the legislature asked the University to put in courses for students who were preparing for business careers. The University pled poverty so the legislature made a special appropriation so that such courses could be offered. The program was given to David Kinley, Professor of Economics, to organize and supervise. Kinley later became the first Dean of the College of Commerce and later the President of the University.

Of the several courses included in the original program only business writing was required of all students electing the program. Kinley assigned the course to the Department of Rhetoric and Oratory in the College of Literature and Arts (Economics was also in the College of Literature and Arts since the College of Commerce had not yet been established). The Department of Rhetoric included all courses in composition and writing, plus courses in journalism and public speaking. Thus it was a larger department than the Department of English Literature, which also included Scandinavian.

How Thomas Arkle Clark (1862-1932) was chosen to teach the course (or why he volunteered to teach it) is not known. He held an endowed chair in rhetoric and within a few years became America's first Dean of Men, a position which he held until his retirement. He was a redoubtable figure and a legend on the campus of the University of Illinois. He taught the course off and on for eleven or twelve years.

Judging by the few writings he has left behind, one shudders to think of what he might have taught. He did not believe in dictation—too impersonal. He did not believe in typing-ditto. He said he could write 20-30 letters a day with his pen and had no need to write more. He also said that one should never ask a woman to write a business letter because a woman's mind is too disorganized to be capable of logical thought. Woman, he thought, is quite unable to distinguish the important from the unimportant and will clutter up her letters with trivia.

The second person to teach the course was Thacher Howland Guild, who taught 19th century literature and was the first organizer of the University Theatre. A drama prize is still offered at Illinois in his name. Guild, however, is chiefly remembered (if remembered at all) as the author of *Illinois Loyalty*, a song so complicated and difficult to sing that it's a wonder students have any energy left for cheering. In 1910 Alta Gwinn, then a graduate teaching assistant in English, taught the course for the first time. She dropped out in 1914 to get married and to work in various businesses, returning in 1917. McJohnston left in 1918.

The original 1902 course description reads: "Business Writing—business correspondence, the making of summaries and abstracts, advertising, proof-reading, and preparation of manuscripts for the press."[12] It met two hours a week for two hours credit. Clark was the only instructor that first year. In 1907 the course was split into two semesters: "The first semester will be devoted to business correspondence with practice in incidental writing, summaries, etc. The second semester will include advertising, preparation of copy, and proofreading."[13]

Creek taught the course for the first time in 1915 and thus was not faced with the problem of what to do without a textbook because in 1915 the Gardner book appeared. Although McJohnston left Illinois in 1918, Alta Gwinn Saunders was not formally designated "in charge of the courses in Business English" until 1921. In 1925 she published the first edition of her textbook, *Effective Business English*, which upon examination will be seen to be almost completely derivative from Hotchkiss and Gardner. The general pattern of the book was a few introductory chapters on general principles such as the 5 C's and the you-attitude followed by chapters on types of letters. This pattern was followed by many books from that time until the present.

Prior to *Effective Business English*, Saunders and Creek published (in 1920) an anthology called *The Literature of Business* which went through five editions until Mrs. Saunders' death in 1948, whereupon Harper and Brothers decided that they did not want to issue a sixth edition. But this anthology is still readable today, 65 years later. It included a wide range of articles on business in general and on various aspects of business writing in particular. Creek said that they felt the need for such an anthology because of a

perceived "lack of depth in the course: as it was taught." Of particular interest to the present-day researcher are the headnotes which give brief biographies of the authors of the articles in the anthology including Gardner, Hotchkiss, and McJohnston.

To summarize: in the beginning teachers scarcely knew what to do with the business writing course. In the absence of textbooks, in the absence of courses at other universities, in the absence of an organization like ABCA to offer help, what could teachers have been expected to do? It is logical to assume that they either used high-school level books like Altmaier's or found materials published by A. W. Shaw or Alexander Hamilton Institute, or boldly struck out on their own. The latter course seems to be the one followed at Illinois and probably at other schools as well. Teachers collected examples of business letters and reports, analyzed them in class, wrote problems based on the kinds of letters that were actually being written in business. It may be that these early business-writing teachers invented the case method. One problem they faced was establishing standards for what was good and what was not. If one looks at the 1918 book called *Commercial Letters* by John B. Updycke and Celia Anne Drew, one finds some horrendous examples of letters which evidently the authors considered models to be followed.

An unanswered question: Who was Celia Anne Drew? She co-authored Hotchkiss's first text. She collected the examples for the Updycke book, some of which were written by University of Illinois students. No other publications are attributed to her.

Experimenting was the order of the day. The Business Writing course was at first one semester, then two semesters, then back to one semester. The content of the course varied from comprehensive and almost all-inclusive of everything written in business until it was narrowed down to simply business letter writing and then later expanded to include other types of writing.

When McJohnston arrived at Illinois in 1913 he lost no time in setting up the basic courses which essentially were: 1) Business Writing (mostly business letter writing), 2) Writing of Abstracts and Summaries (mostly report writing), and 3) Sales Writing (which was McJohnston's own particular field of expertise). Those same three courses exist today, 72 years later, although the contents, outlines, and amount of credit have undergone changes. Later developments included Undergraduate Open Seminars, Independent Study, and a graduate course. The courses which McJohnston originated became models for work in business writing at many other universities which were just beginning programs.

Courses at Other Universities

Illinois, of course, was not the only university setting up courses in business writing between 1902-1920. New York University was an early pioneer, and

Hotchkiss and Kilduff were vastly influential in the development of the work at other universities. Gardner at Wisconsin writes in the preface to his book that he had been teaching the course for five years, which would mean that he started in 1910. He does not say that he was the first.

Walter Kay Smart at Northwestern wrote a book in 1916 from which we may deduce that courses were started at an early date there. McJohnston went there in 1920.

Roy Davis at Boston University must have started early since he wrote a high school text in 1916 while he was a high school teacher. Davis was the fifth president of ABCA. No doubt there are other early books and evidences of early collegiate courses still to be uncovered by further research.

Liberal Arts and Commerce

Returning to the subject of what the early teachers did without textbooks and models to follow, it is important to keep in mind that they were mostly the products of liberal arts education. Collegiate schools of business are a comparatively recent development. Although the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania was founded in 1881, it was not until 1916 that the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business was established with seventeen member schools. The teaching of business subjects, with the exception of economics, was not generally approved by colleges of liberal arts. There was much more moving from one field to another in the early days than there is now. Gardner, though a Professor of Business Administration, wrote a Preface to *Woolley's Handbook of Composition*.

What Hotchkiss studied at Yale is not known, but one can guess that his degree was in some area of liberal arts. What did he teach at Beloit? Probably English. Saunders, Anderson, and Creek were English graduates. Some of those who first taught business writing (e.g., Clark, Creek, and Saunders) had had experience teaching Freshman Composition (or Rhetoric as it was then called).

The Rhetoric handbooks often had a section on business letter writing, emphasizing primarily the form and mechanics of the business letter. It is possible that Clark used the same book that was used in Freshman Rhetoric, adding examples of letters collected from business.

Try to imagine what it would be like to be a teacher of business writing in the early 1900s and having in your background only experience teaching Freshman Composition plus perhaps some business experience from summer jobs or from work done during a period of dropping out of school. One can see that the natural thing to do is to teach fundamentals of correct writing plus the elements of correct business letter form. Such a course might have been deadly if the teachers had not had some imagination to bring to it.

Creek reports that the course he taught at Illinois was immensely popular with the students. The popularity might be the result of comparison with the dullness of Freshman Composition. At least the business writing course was concerned with live, current issues, and that appealed to students who were planning to go into business.

The "Business Education" Influence

Anther influence which has yet to be researched is that of the business education teachers, meaning those who taught shorthand and typing or taught students who were to become teachers of those subjects. Office management also came under the title of business education. The American Business Communication Association was founded by a coalition of business education and English teachers.

Placed on the market in 1874 by Remington, and exhibited at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, the typewriter was quickly adopted by American business. Naether says, "Without exaggeration we may say that the business letter assumed modern form and improved style in the United States in 1893—improvements closely allied with the use of the typewriter."[14] Naether may be going too far in picking a precise year, but the advent of the typewriter required schools and teachers to teach the new skills. Shorthand was a natural ally to typing. High schools and proprietary business colleges provided instruction, and universities began to train teachers in schools of education and schools of business.

An early set of little books called *Business Letters* by Benn Pitman and Jerome B. Howard was published 1903-1908 by the Phonographic Institute Company in Cincinnati. These books were designed to be used in teaching shorthand and cover such interesting subjects as "railroad correspondence." The letters are not models we would want to follow. They are simply exercises for students of shorthand and typing. An antiquarian reader, who would like to read about buggies and similar subjects, would be fascinated by them. The business education teachers insofar as they taught business correspondence were inclined to emphasize form and mechanics and correctness. A new teacher asking "But what is so different about business letters?" might well come to the conclusion that form, mechanics, and use of set phrases constituted the difference.

But even at the earliest date there was argument over the use of stereotyped expressions, particularly at the beginnings and ends of letters. One school of thought held that they were unnatural, even atrocious, and should be eliminated. But there were others who said that these expressions were expected by the reader, that they did not mean anything anyway, and therefore one might just as well use them.

The Influence of Rhetoric Handbooks

What of the 19th and early 20th century Rhetoric handbooks? Since it seems that they were used by early teachers of business writing, were they of any substantial value? It would not seem so. Certainly an English teacher, discovering his business writing students had not learned the fundamentals of good English writing in their Freshman Composition course, would attempt to remedy this deficiency by offering remedial help by means of a Rhetoric handbook, probably the same one used in the Freshman Composition course, although little advice on business writing was given in these books.

One of the most widely used was *English Composition* by Barrett Wendell of Harvard, published in 1893. Wendell says "Nowadays we are no longer 'obedient, humble servants," but 'truly' or 'sincerely' or 'faithfully yours,'—not because either phrase was ever literally true, but simply and solely because, nobody knows why, good use once sanctioned one form, and now sanctions the others." Wendell goes on to discuss good use because "good use inevitably is the basis of all good style."[15] Although true, that doesn't offer much help to the teacher.

More help is given in a book called *The Elements of Rhetoric and Composition, A Textbook for Schools and Colleges*, by David J. Hill, president of Bucknell University, published in 1878. He devoted a whole section of the book to letters, but about all he says is "Letters of business are of great importance on account of the interest frequently involved in them. They should be clear, brief, direct, and gentlemanly." Then he goes on to social letters, concluding with general rules for writing letters: 1) answer promptly, 2) write every letter carefully, 3) express your thoughts with directness, 4) study neatness in folding and sealing.[16]

What About the "Letter Writers"?

Do the books called "letter writers," published so profusely in the 19th century, offer any help? They would scarcely be of use in the classroom even though they do develop many of the principles that are taught in business writing classes today. An excellent review of this genre can be found in the appendix to *The Business Letter: Principles and Problems*, Third Edition, by Carl A. Naether of the University of Southern California. Naether carefully traces the development from a reliance on British letter writers and British practice to distinctively American letter writers and a less formal practice. Although they all talk about the need for plain, easily understood English, the examples they give scarcely demonstrate that. *Martine's Sensible Letter Writer*, 1866, says "The characteristics of a commercial style are conciseness

and perspicuity; with the exception of a few terms of compliment, scarcely a superfluous word should be permitted.[17] At least Martine admits that the complimentary terms are superfluous. It is doubtful that these books published for the trade found their way in to college classrooms even in the early period.

Overview

To provide an overview—the development of courses and textbooks for the teaching of business writing in colleges paralleled the development of collegiate schools of business. In 1900, New York University established its school of business. In 1906 the course in business writing was put into the curriculum. According to Professor J. Harold Janis, "Our first course in Business English was a given in 1906 by the Dean himself, Joseph French Johnson."[18]

Hotchkiss moved to New York University from Beloit in 1908 and took over the course. In 1909, he published a set of books called *Business Correspondence*, as mentioned above. Although they might have been used at New York University, it is doubtful that they were used anywhere else. That leaves us with Gardner as the author of the first college-level textbook in business writing. Naether gives Gardner the credit saying that his book was the "first of twentieth-century collegiate caliber."[19] Gardner's book appeared in 1915 and was immediately adopted at Illinois and probably other universities. But in 1916, Hotchkiss and Drew published *Business English, Principles and Practice*, which soon supplanted Gardner at Illinois and probably at other universities as well.

Little has been done in researching the history of any aspect of business writing in this century. A notable exception is a well-researched article by John S. Fielden, "A Brief History of the Better Letters Association." This was published in *The ABWA Bulletin* in January 1955. Fielden points out the emergence of interest in business writing in the early years of this century, resulting in the founding of the Better Letters Association (later merged with the Direct Mail Advertising Association).[20]

World War I seems to have been the turning point. At the end of the War, the veterans returned to college, looking for programs that would train them for business careers so that they could get on with their lives. Enrollments in all courses in business increased and business writing was among them, often a required course.

To survey the textbooks and other publications since 1920 would be a monumental task, but it would be useful if somebody would research the development of the teaching of business writing at those universities which had business writing programs early—New York University, Wisconsin,

Northwestern, Boston University, and possibly DePaul, Nebraska, and Southern California. And there may be others. We know so little about the origins and development of education in this area, and research is not easy. The pioneers have died, leaving behind very few accounts of the work they did and the obstacles they overcame. University records are often incomplete, if not missing altogether. Obviously doing this research will not get easier as time goes by.

Notes and References

1. Biographical information about Hotchkiss and other early teachers and writers was obtained from *Who Was Who in America*, Chicago, IL, Marquis Who's Who, Inc., 1976, and from the headnotes to the articles in *The Literature of Business*, by Alta Gwinn Saunders and H. L. Creek, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1920.

2. J. Willis Westlake, *How to Write Letters*, Philadelphia, Christopher Sower Company, 1876, p. 3.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

5. See Carter A. Daniel, "Sherwin Cody: Business Communication Pioneer," *The Journal of Business Communication*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Spring 1982, pp. 3-14.

6. Letter from J. Harold Janis to the author, April 16, 1982.

7. H. L. Creek, "How I Became an Expert in Business English," *The ABWA Bulletin*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, October 1952, pp. 5-7.

8. Alta Gwinn Saunders and H. L. Creek, *The Literature of Business*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1920, p. 321.

9. Letter from H. L. Creek, to the author, April 18, 1957, in answer to a request for information about Harrison McJohnston.

10. *Catalog of the University of Illinois*, Urbana, IL, 1914.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Catalog of the University of Illinois*, 1902.

13. *Catalog of the University of Illinois*, 1907.

14. Carl A. Naether, *The Business Letter, Principles and Problems*, Third Edition, Dubuque, IA, Wm. C. Brown Company, 1952, p. 740.

15. Barrett Wendell, *English Composition*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893, p. 25.

16. David H. Hill, *The Elements of Rhetoric and Composition*, New Edition, New York, Sheldon & Company, 1884, pp. 182, 184.

17. *Martine's Sensible Letter-Writer*, New York, Dick & Fitzgerald, 1866, p. 25.

18. Letter from J. Harold Janis to the author, April 16, 1982.

19. Naether, *op. cit.*, p. 745.

20. John S. Fielden, "A Brief History of the Better Letters Association," *The ABWA Bulletin*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, January 1955, pp. 5-11.

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No doubt further digging into old books, combined with a little luck, will uncover early works heretofore unknown. Alred is in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee; Reep in the English Department at the University of Akron; Limaye in the Department of General Business at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Saunders, Alta Gwinn and Herbert LeSourd Creek, *The Literature of Business*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1920. The first anthology for use as a supplement to the business writing textbook. The fifth edition was published in 1946, two years before Saunders' death in an airplane crash. The headnotes are of particular value to a researcher, and it was the first of the early books to include a bibliography. Saunders is identified as Instructor in Business English at the University of Illinois; Creek as Professor of English at Purdue University. This work contains 52 articles from a wide range of books and periodicals: 24 under the heading, "The Profession of Business," and 28 under "The Business Letter and Related Principles of Business," mostly "related principles."

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incorrect spelling and bad punctuation, as such errors are more conspicuous in print than in ordinary writing."

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Daniel, Carter A. "Sherwin Cody: Business Communication Pioneer," Vol. 19, No. 2, Spring 1982, pp. 3-14. Daniel was aided in his research by Morrill Cody, Sherwin's son. Cody was an important figure in early days when home study was often the only way to learn business writing. The famous ads for his "School of English" written by Maxwell Sackheim are classics of advertising. As Daniel says, "Shining a flashlight into corners of history always illuminates the present too."